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THE UNIVERSALISTS: RADICAL SECTARIANISM (1760-1850)

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## THE UNIVERSALISTS: RADICAL SECTARIANISM 1760-1840

This thesis is a study of the Universalist sects that developed in Britain after 1760. Societies were established in the city of London and Edinburgh in the 1760s and 1770s; in Glasgow, Liverpool, Coleraine, Kent and Sussex, Dorset, Wiltshire and East Anglia in the early decades of the nineteenth century. All took as their central tenet the certainty of salvation for all men; all looked to human emancipation here on earth, and progress based on reason. Theirs was a creed that inevitably inclined believers to take the action necessary to bring society into conformity with their rational egalitarian principles. Most of these Universalists were remarkable for their high level of radical political commitment. Several became leaders of the labour movement, and their millenarian vision of a just and equal society formed the basis of moral-force Chartism.

The thesis seeks to discover the theological and intellectual origins of the Universalist faith, in the Methodist revival, pietism, the millenarian tradition and Enlightenment rationality. The founding of the sects is related to the social, political and economic context, and to the aspirations of the tradesmen who formed the main part of Universalist congregations. Each society's composition, organisation and stated goals are analysed against its role in society, and the impact of contemporary ideas and events. Particular attention is given to the relationship between Universalist theology and radical politics.

The central theme of the thesis is to assess to what extent Universalists were inspired to political activity by their religious faith. Did they simply translate secular socialism into the familiar Biblical terminology, as has been argued. Or was their whole ordering of experience shaped by a conviction that they were the instruments of God's purpose to realise his kingdom here on earth.



## PREFACE

The information in this thesis is derived from unpublished material listed in the Bibliography, Section A; upon parliamentary papers; on periodical literature of the period circa 1760-1840; and upon contemporary books and pamphlets. The thesis is also indebted to those secondary works cited in the footnotes and Bibliography, Section F. I am grateful to staff at the following libraries and repositories for their assistance: British Library, Bloomsbury and Colindale; the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane and Kew; Dr Williams Library; Conway Hall Library; London County Council Record Office; Guildhall Library; Friends Reference Library; Institute of Historical Research; Glasgow District Library; the National Library of Wales; and London and Open University Libraries.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The 18th century is generally recognised to have been an age of popular religious enthusiasm as well as one of rational theology and deistical freethinking. The religious conflicts of the 16th and 17th centuries had called into doubt all the points of the Christian faith and reduced them to the level of controversy. Christianity was still based upon revelation, but every man had the right to interpret it for himself. The result was a profusion of sects, each of whom emphasised one particular article of faith. As Ronald Knox has pointed out, 'In all ages, the tendency of the heretic has been to single out one aspect of Christian life and doctrine, and treat it as if it were the whole'. (1) Most sects took the name of their founder, or were awarded a nickname according to their habits, Shaking or Methodical. The Universalist sect chose to be called by its distinguishing doctrine, the belief that all men would eventually be saved.

The vision of all things returning into unity with God had attracted many Christian theologians, and in the Middle Ages it was espoused by sectarian groups like the Anabaptists with radical political leanings. (2) But the emergence of a sect denoted primarily by its belief in an universal restoration of all mankind was a distinctively 18th century phenomenon. The emphasis upon the

fundamental equality of God's purposes towards mankind suggests a close affinity with the secular ideals of the Enlightenment.

It was based on a rational interpretation of scripture in accordance with natural morality: 'religion must be in conformity with morality'. (3) It involved a vision of human emancipation and an expectation of progress based on reason. The double orientation to a redemptive past and a redemptive future constituted its central dynamic. (4) The certainty of universal salvation liberated men from the fear of damnation and the necessity of working for their own salvation. It freed working men from their allotted place in an hierarchical society. Inevitably it inclined them to take the action necessary to bring society into conformity with rational democratic principles. And British Universalists did become leaders of the labour movement, absorbing secular creeds like Spenceanism and Owenism to their religious perspective, and transforming their Universalist beliefs into Chartism.

Historians have widely divergent views on the relationship between religious belief and political activity. Some have emphasised the libertarian and egalitarian ideas that lie at the core of radical Christianity. In asserting that the poor possess the truths of religion it overturned all accepted intellectual and educational hierarchies. It brought social emancipation and freedom from deference through the restatement of the simple principle of the

equality of men before God. And this principle led inevitably to equality of property and political equality. (5)

Others have affirmed the link between politics and millenarianism, to which Universalists were inevitably committed. Millenarianism represents a generalised belief about the world and changes in it. It must promise some transformation of the social order, provide a specific social programme. In their essence millennialist theories are related to the social situation by extrapolation, diagnosis and criticism, by the need to identify the evil which will be reversed. All theorising about world history is essentially political, the religious expression of social and political opinions. The great prophetic symbols are already political statements, only altered in their specific focus. (6) But it is not clear how far millenarianism was the vehicle for emergent socialist thinking, rather than its inspiration. It has been argued that working class radicals simply used a Christian vocabulary to express their criticisms and goals. The millenarian idea was put to radical purposes; it became revolutionary by identifying with revolutionary forces. (7)

The confluence of religion and radical politics after the middle of the 18th century is acknowledged by even those most hostile to the notion of a Christian socialism. (8) The growth of capitalism encouraged a more bourgeois ideology of civic man, and a political theory based on commerce. (9) In the City of London particularly, members of all dissenting sects were prominent amongst the tiny

minority of Commonwealthmen who maintained the revolutionary tradition. They demanded not only freedom of thought and worship, but a curb on ministerial power and a reform of the parliamentary system, with a wider franchise and redistribution of seats. (10) Dissenters were of necessity radicals to the extent that the problem of religious freedom had become a question of political liberty. They enjoyed freedom of worship only at the expense of their political rights. So they argued that religious and political liberty were both inalienable natural rights protected by the sovereign people.

This middling group of dissenting tradesmen also had sound economic reasons for interesting itself in national politics to the extent of dominating the reform movement. In a thriving domestic economy, it felt threatened by an increasingly powerful executive, a centralising state, and single party government. Political participation had been reduced by the Septennial Act of 1716, and representation became increasingly anomalous. At the same time the growth of credit as the customary means of conducting transactions at all levels of society made the conduct of government of more immediate concern. Credit was vulnerable to war, domestic crises, bad harvests and international speculation. Government policy determined business confidence and liquidity. (11)

Tradesmen objected to the lack of regulation or control of credit, and its abuse by speculators and stockjobbers. Over three-quarters of all taxation derived from customs and excise duties, and a

disproportionate amount fell on the middling and lower orders. And trading concerns were now regulated by statute law, so traders needed a representative to ensure that a statute embodied the interests of those whom it affected. The American crisis gave prominence to the problem of how to reconcile the Englishman's inalienable rights, civil and natural, with the unlimited power of a sovereign parliament.

Thus parliamentary reform became the dominant concern of the city tradesmen. They demanded above all accountability, the removal of placemen, more frequent elections, and the representation of all taxpayers. Association was the vital mechanism by which they sought to give effect to their aspirations. But they lacked effective leadership and organisation, or any coherent political programme. Although most stressed the equality of man before God, none could be termed truly egalitarian or levelling. Despite the popularity of Leveller tracts, all found community of property impractical, and their notion of 'people' was still mainly based upon property. (12)

There were different levels of political commitment amongst the various dissenting sects. Old Dissent was generally conservative and apolitical, with the exception of a few radical Baptists like Thomas and Brand Hollis, James Foster and Richard Baron. (13) The connection between Methodism and working class movements has been warmly debated since Halevy claimed that England had been spared revolution because of the stabilising influence of evangelical

religion, especially Methodism. (14) It has been pointed out that Methodism was particularly strong amongst artisan groups from whom most was feared in times of political excitement. And there is evidence that the seceding Methodist sects provided political and industrial leadership. (15) But the only link that has been drawn between their political activity and their religion is the broad parallel between Wesleyan Arminianism and Enlightenment liberalism in their doctrines of perfection and assurance. (16)

Only the Arians, later Unitarians, displayed a consistent radical social and political outlook as the logical outcome of their rational religion. Materialist, necessitarian, their creed represented the fusion of the mechanical philosophy with the traditional spirit of English dissent. The belief in reason and liberty, the perfectibility of man, was bound up with the belief in the divine purpose for human life. The Unitarian historian has catalogued their contribution to social progress in England, from the 18th century political radicals, Cartwright, Jebb, Price and Priestley, to the 19th century politicians and civil servants John Fielden and Southwood Smith. (17)

But these were essentially isolated individual efforts, informed by a cool and rational commitment to human rights and social progress. Although Unitarians shared the Universalist intellectual heritage, and most believed in the universal restoration, the doctrine never held first place in their religion. Their faith lacked the powerful experiential basis of Universalism, its emotional dynamic. (18) It



was this assurance of salvation that transformed the little societies of Universalist tradesmen into political radicals looking urgently beyond their immediate economic interests to a new social order.

So the central theme of this thesis will be to discover to what extent Universalists were inspired to political activity by religious faith. It could not have been their case, as has been argued, that apocalyptic fervour was directed to personal salvation. (19) The consistency of their political activity militates against the theory that theirs was the 'chiliasm of despair', religious revivalism as an alternative to political activity. (20) The main problem is whether the Universalists' ordering of experience was shaped by a predominantly Christian and millennial faith, or whether they simply translated secular socialism into the familiar Biblical terminology. (21) A careful analysis of their writings in conjunction with their political activities, will, it is hoped, supply an answer.

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Religion', pp 65-90. He points out however, p 77, that Levellers were small property owners, and supported private property and inequalities of wealth.- 'Their political aims were influenced by their religion, and their religion by their political aims. The interrelation between their religion and their politics was determined by their recognition of the division and conflicts in their society, and of the fact that both the church and the state were instruments of class', pp 89-90.

6. J.F.C. Harrison, *op.cit.*, p 78. W.H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists* (1978), pp 20-2.

7. Oliver, *op.cit.*, p 150.

8. eg. E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Religion and the Rise of Socialism' in *New Edinburgh Review* (Summer/Autumn 1977), p 9; 'Whether the activists and leaders of plebeian and labour movements were secularists or religious dissidents, they were almost by definition critics of the Establishment in both its lay and its religious forms. See too more generally, *Primitive Rebels* (1958), pp 129-30, 'a marked parallelism between movements of religious, social and political consciousness'.

9. J.G. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), pp 460-523.

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16. e.g. Semmel, *op.cit.* p 8; A.W. Harrison, *Arminianism* (1937), pp 163-203.
17. R. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (1938), pp 14-184. See too Willey, *op.cit.* Ch. X; C.G. Bolam ed. *The English Presbyterians* (1968), pp 219-236; M. Fitzpatrick, 'Toleration and Truth' in *Enlightenment and Dissent* no 1 (1982), pp 3-29. Stephen, *op.cit.* pp 427-446.
18. D. Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (1985), pp 47-55, distinguishes between the two faiths in America on the basis of their rational as opposed to their emotional bases.
19. Thompson, *op.cit.* p 419.
20. *ibid* p 429. Compare Harrison, *op.cit.* p 223, who sees no polarity between religious millenarianism and political radicalism, which are rather different expressions of the same beliefs. There is corroboration of this in D. Lovegrove, 'Calvinist Itineraries in England 1780-90'. Cambridge PhD thesis, 1981.
21. E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Religion and the Rise of Socialism', *op.cit.* p 9: 'There was no working-class Christian socialism of any importance; merely the standard kind of socialism, elaborated by the secular thinkers, and translated into the familiar biblical terminology'.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ORIGINS OF UNIVERSALIST SOCIETIES IN BRITAIN: JAMES RELLY

The first British society to be distinguished by the belief that all men will eventually be saved began to meet in the City of London in the early 1760s. Its immediate context was the Methodist revival. Its leader was a Calvinist Methodist preacher, James Relly (1722-1778), who was converted by Whitefield during his visit to Wales in 1743, when he was twenty-one. (1) Relly was born in Jefferson, Pembrokeshire, of 'respectable parents', educated at Pembroke Grammar School, and apprenticed to a cow farrier, an occupation in which he apparently excelled 'on account of his activity and great strength'. (2) He quickly became one of Whitefield's most 'strenuous supporters', and shortly a preacher and minister of a congregation at Ridllangiregg. (3) By 1746 he was travelling the West country as a missionary; 'the Lord much with him' wrote Howell Harris in the same year. (4)

Relly divided his time between Bristol, Plymouth and the London Tabernacle, and in 1749 Whitefield invited him to take over the Tabernacle pastorate jointly with Charles Adams and James Beaumont. (5) All three refused, and later that year Relly left the Methodists to join William Cudworth's Connexion for a while, and

perhaps his brother John in Wales. (6) In 1753 he published his distinctive justification for universal redemption in *Salvation Completed and Secured in Christ as the Covenant of the People*. Here and in the more coherent *Union: A Treatise on the Consanguinity and Affinity between Christ and his Church* of 1759, Relly affirmed the ontological unity of all men with Christ, by which our sins were purged by his blood and sacrifice. Christ dwells in every man, simply by virtue of his being a man - not as a result of faith or good works; consequently universal salvation is assured irrespective of belief or behaviour.

So comfortable a doctrine, delivered with Welsh fire and emotional fervour, seems to have made an immediate popular appeal. Relly's ex-colleague Cudworth complained in 1758 that the 'poison insinuates with many' and of his 'zealous adherents'. (7) By 1762 at least, Relly was preaching to a large congregation at Coachmakers Hall (just west of the Guildhall), where his obituarist claims that 'notwithstanding the great size of the place, the Court Yard was filled with hearers'. (8) Hostile observers told Relly's disciple John Murray that

The undisciplined and unprincipled of every class flock to his church, his congregation is astonishingly large, the carriages of the great block up the street in which his meeting house stands, and he is the idol of the voluptuous of every description. (9)

Inevitably perhaps, such an audience would soon seek new excitement, and in 1769 Relly moved to the partly derelict Crosby Hall, between Bishopsgate, Leadenhall and St Mary Axe. (10) When Murray visited it in 1770 he was 'astonished to observe a striking proof of the falsity of (earlier) reports. No coaches thronged the streets, nor surrounded the doors of this meetinghouse; there was no vestige of grandeur either within or without'. There were apparently no seats, only benches, and the pulpit was a few rough wooden boards. 'The audience corresponded with the house. They did not appear very religious; that is they were not melancholy; and I therefore suspected they had not much piety'. (11)

The little group of disciples that remained to Relly in 1770 were obviously working men, seekers after religious truth, who had been first attracted by his charismatic personality and powerful conviction. They remained because his doctrine presented a vision of human potential which no other sect could offer. Such men would have been self-educated tradesmen who grew up outside the communities of Old Dissent. They might well have rejected Methodism for its emphasis on emotion over reason, yet be unprepared to contemplate the Unitarian position to which a few intellectuals were turning. Relly's doctrine of union with Christ was simple, rational, and completely liberating. In its mystical humanism and promise of a new and juster society, it exactly matched the radical political climate of the 1770s, and the aspirations of independent tradesmen.



A belief in universal redemption has been generally linked with the rise of democratic theories, particularly in the Commonwealth, when it was held by Familists, Diggers, Ranters, Quakers and Levellers. (12) After the Restoration, universal redemption was argued on rational principles, as in Jeremiah White's 'Natural and Revealed Religion explaining each other' in *Harleian Miscellany*. Latitudinarians More, Tillotson, Paley, Burnet and Whiston all wrote rational refutations of endless punishment as repugnant to divine wisdom. Deists and freethinkers such as Newton, Toland, Annet, all repudiated vindictive justice in the deity, and Hartley made the inevitability and necessity of salvation a logical concomitant of his 'associationist' psychology. (13) The *Analytical Review* was driven to comment on the popularity of universalism in the 18th century. 'The doctrine of the final happiness of mankind..is so pleasing a speculation to a benevolent mind, that we do not wonder it meets with so many advocates'. (14)

So to understand why universalism should come to be formulated as the dominant characteristic of a religious sect in the mid-18th century, we must obviously set it in the context of the radical political ideas of the Commonwealth, and the rationality of the Enlightenment. It would be helpful if we could attribute the development of Relly's doctrine to specific authorities, but all we know is that he read many books on redemption, and then turned to the Bible as sole authority for a theory which he claimed was wholly original. (15) However, an analysis of his writings will perhaps indicate certain general theological and intellectual influences.

Another approach towards explaining the widespread belief in universal redemption in the 18th century might be to link it with social and economic change. (16) It is no accident that Relly's universalism began in the City of London, and coincided with the mounting political unrest of the 1760s. A long tradition of City democracy and religious freedom had fostered the popular egalitarianism and independence which found expression in continuous opposition to Court and government from 1730. After 1763 this opposition hardened into a coherent programme of constitutional reform, as the peace and repressive policy to American colonists began to threaten commercial interests. (17) The economic needs of urban tradesmen urgently demanded the representation of their interests in Parliament. (18) To these, a theology of liberty, equality and brotherhood would be especially congenial.

The social and political context may well account for much of the 18th century fashion for universalist theories, but not directly for Relly's version. Relly himself was an artisan, but there is no evidence that he was involved in political activity. He was above all an evangelist, and one nurtured in Calvinist Methodism. It is therefore in Calvinist Methodism that we should seek the origin of Relly's scheme of universal redemption.

At first sight Relly's universalism is the antithesis of Calvin's doctrine of grace to the predestined few. Max Weber has called it a doctrine of extreme inhumanity, magnificent inconsistency, inner loneliness and isolation of the individual; the negation of all

sensuous and emotional elements from culture and religion. (19) It asserted absolute determinism and the complete transcendence of God; its most chilling aspect man's ignorance of whether he was elect, and inability to help himself. But the seminal influence upon Rely, Whitefield, took his Calvinism from the much more mellow version of the 17th Article. (20)

As the godly consideration of Predestination and Election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons and such as feel in themselves the working of the spirit of Christ..as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God.

The suggestion here of assurance of salvation through proof of election was firmly endorsed by Whitefield, who was 'firmly persuaded that God has chosen me in Christ'. (21)

Whitefield never read Calvin, and his preaching lacked Calvin's systematic presentation of thought. He preached 18,000 sermons, but the 78 published had only one theme: in the natural state man was estranged from God; Christ by his death and atonement made reconciliation possible; to achieve salvation, man with the guidance and grace of the Holy Ghost, must repudiate sin and openly identify with Christ, 'through a real and inward change of nature, wrought on us by powerful operations of the Holy Ghost, conveyed to and nourished in our hearts, by a constant use of all the means of grace, evidenced by a good life, and bringing forth the fruits of the spirit. (22)

Free grace was opposed in principle but not in practice. Sermons invariably concluded with protracted invitations to sinners to come to Christ for salvation, entirely democratic and unqualified. Examples are: *Kingdom of God*, 'who can be saved? all who believe with joy... my dear Redeemer is willing to receive you all'; *Parting Blessing*, 'the grace of God is free for all poor souls that are willing to accept it in Christ'; *The Gospel a dying Saint's Triumph*, 'till we have all, with yonder saint, and all that have gone before us, experienced compleat salvation in the kingdom of heaven'; *The Lord our Light*, 'Jesus stands ready with open arms to receive you ... he will make you believe in his name, that you may be saved'. (23) Whitefield's message that Christ died for all came to sound almost like universal salvation. (24)

In a sense, then, Relly took Whitefield's brand of Calvinist Methodism and extended its implications into a systematic doctrine. His theory retained the cardinal Calvinist principles of determinism and the transcendence of God. Universal salvation was determined by God even before the atonement: 'if the Gospel is true before our believing, then union with Christ before faith is true'. God loved mankind before Jesus died for them, Scriptures affirm, and God cannot love the unclean. (25) Only God is good; human goodness is just lying vanity, falsehood, vain pretensions, which encourage party and separateness. (26)

Far from looking to human conduct for proof of election, Relly dismissed it as irrelevant. A favourite phrase of his was 'though they are black in themselves yet they are comely in Christ their

covenant'. Though believers may be 'more caught in the toils of sin and shame than any, all our sins are purged by Christ's blood, and we take on his righteousness'. (27) By accentuating the doctrine of grace to the point where human behaviour falls outside the moral law, Relly denied the very spirit of Methodism, and came near to Antinomianism, 'Calvinism's lower-class alter ego'. (28)

Antinomianism had been a significant feature of the Commonwealth sects, particularly those with radical social and political aspirations (29), and was again a feature of 18th century popular enthusiasm. John Wesley saw it as the main threat to his movement: 'the main flood in England is Antinomianism'. (30) It apparently spread 'like wildfire' among Wesley's societies at Norwich, Manchester and Dublin. (31) Wesley recorded a number of Antinomian preachers in his Journal, including one who claimed, like Relly, that 'there is no sin to those whose hearts are free'. (32)

Antinomianism was a logical extension of Calvinist theology which found ready acceptance in those already influenced by secular ideas of liberty and equality. And it seems to have been particularly congenial to Relly's personality and experience. In the years before his conversion he was known for a 'wild, ungovernable youth addicted to bad company', and Howell Harris held him at least partly responsible for a row between Whitefield's and Wesley's followers in Plymouth in 1746: 'if Bro. Trymbath and Bro. Relly and Jenkyns had ye same spirit of moderation, this flame would not have rose so high'. (33) Relly's popularity with the Kingswood colliers seems to

have become a legend with his followers, his obituarist claiming that he was 'so greatly followed as to excite the jealousy of Whitefield, which occasioned a separation between them'. These 'ungovernable people', noted for their lack of deference and independent habits, have been called 'the most rebellious group of labour men in the country between the 1720s and the 1750s', and the most prominent rioters 1714-54. (34)

Antinomianism in Relly's immediate circle was a constant preoccupation of Howell Harris. In May 1745 he noted in his Journal: 'saw how imperceptibly our dear brethren fall into the many errors of Antinomianism'; and in November 1747 he expelled two Antinomians from the Bristol society. (35) By this time Relly himself was preaching antinomian doctrine in London. A letter from William Alls of the Old French Schools, Grey Eagle Street, to Relly in January 1747 confirms this. He complained that 'I was led blindfold by your abominations many years'; that Relly had taught him to look into himself for marks of election, not to God. 'You also said the Lord never chastiseth for sins of children of the world at all, who live in open sin'. (36)

Relly's letters of this time display a fervid combination of spiritual ecstasy and a desperate sense of sin. In April 1746 he wrote from Bristol to Thomas Adams 'Deep is the misery of iniquity in my Heart' from 'Tryalls from Satan's temptations and my wicked heart yielding unto them'. In May he told Howell Harris that he was much afflicted in body with sickness, and 'much grieved in Spirits

with many great and fiery and grievous temptations'. The following year he again unburdened himself to Harris: 'oh what a worm I am', 'sink into an eternal maze of misery', 'misterious depth of iniquity'. (37) That Relly may have been known to have yielded to temptation is suggested in John Stephens' letter of 1746, 'Brother Raily, your very Black but very comely..united little sinfull Brother John Stephens'. (38)

Relly obviously possessed great personal attraction and charisma. Bennett and Bogue alleged that Harris' 'raw disciples gained the reputation of wonderful men at the cheap rate of a wild imagination and a voluble tongue'; that 'the congregation was kept up by variety, increased by novelty, and powerfully affected by the Welsh fire, animated addresses'. (39) In July 1746, Chris Bassett warned Relly that as he was 'highly favoured of God and greatly beloved of the brethren, Satan will doubtless not be wanting to puff you up and make you think of yourself above what you ought to'. (40) Other letters show that he was on affectionate terms with members of the society, including women. Mary Ann Page wrote from Bristol: 'Many of us under great concern for You..thought it very Hard you did not send word how you were..With a longing impatience I have waited to yeare from you'. (41)

And it was a close attachment to a woman that occasioned Relly's separation from the Calvinist Methodists. Sexual promiscuity was considered an inevitable adjunct of antinomian ideas, a sign of spiritual emancipation and defiance of social convention. Harris

recorded in 1747 that one in the Southwark society was living with another woman's husband. 'At Mr Cudworth's and say he saw no harm in it, when one woman would not do, why may not take another'. (42) With his desperate sense of sin, Relly was clearly far from this extreme position, but in April 1749 he told Harris that he was tempted to 'be an apostate and expose all religion'. (43) He may have been involved with a woman at this time, because his letter of November 1749 to Harris referred to a letter sent to him at Newcastle which 'bred much uneasiness in my wife and many jarring because I would not shew it to her..oh my dear Bro, I deserve nothing but Hell and Hatred of all the brethren, but I know your Heart is as the Heart of Jesus, and therefore Hope you will do all you can to ward off all Reproach from the cause of our dear Lord brought by me, I think it would be right if the thing be as feared for the person to go to Newcastle as at first proposed..for our Saviour's sake I hope you will pardon me, and Endeavour to recover by prayer and advice what I as a Christian and minister have lost'. (44)

Of course it was impossible to keep such a matter secret, and on 29 December Harris recorded that he had conversed with Whitefield, 'and find Mr Wesley's affair and Brother R...y's affair is come out', (45) On 16 January: 'To Fleet Street where I saw the strange power of carnal love and living in sin without recovering by Brother James Relly. He saying whilst he was bad with one, called her his wife though married to another, was only concerned lest it may come out



and stumble the weak, seeing it no sin before God and so excused it to her'. (46)

Circumstances had brought Relly to the extreme Calvinist Antinomian position that ethical standards were non-existent for the elect, (or perhaps already in his view, for all). (47) To some extent such a position was a logical extension of the Calvinist insistence on grace over works, and on the transcendence of God over man. Relly's colleague at the Tabernacle, William Cudworth (1717-1763) had arrived independently at a similar position. Wesley linked him with Relly as 'properly Antinomian, absolute enemies to the law of God..They would 'preach Christ' as they called it, but without one word either of holiness or good works'. (48)

Cudworth had left the Church of England for the Presbyterian church in Swallow Street at the age of 19, where he espoused the 'Marrow' doctrines condemned by the General Assembly as Antinomian. These were a form of extreme Calvinism which held that assurance is of the essence of faith, that atonement and pardon are universal, that holiness is not necessary to salvation, and that fear of punishment and hope of reward should not be allowed as motives of a believer's obedience, the believer no longer being under the rule of law as a rule of life. (49) Inevitably Cudworth quarrelled with his minister, and left in 1743 to set up a small congregation in Spitalfields. Whitefield invited him to join this with the care of a school in the Tabernacle, and he seems to have continued to preach to Methodist congregations while increasing his own Connexion, adding five more

churches in London, and societies in Norwich and Fornsett. (50) In Norwich he was in competition with Wesley, who recorded in 1759, 'One in particular warmly told me, she could not like mine or Mr Martin's doctrine; it always threw her into heaviness. But in dear Mr Cudworth's she could find comfort'. (51)

The comfort of Cudworth's doctrine lay in its emphasis on free grace over individual righteousness. 'A Sinner's Right to Christ arises not from the Operation of God's Spirit upon him', nor from 'Marks and Evidences of a Work of Grace within me', but 'from the Free Grant made to Sinners'. (52) Like Rely, he condemned those who felt superior in their righteousness, proclaiming instead 'the full sufficiency of the finished work of Jesus' for guilty and righteous alike. (53) Wesley and other contemporaries considered that such doctrine amounted to an invitation to loose living. (54) But Cudworth was a respectable shopkeeper and family man 'of eminent holiness and integrity'. (55) Samuel Ewing, in *Three Essays* (1799) summed up his doctrine as 'eternal life is given to every hearer of the gospel'.

It is in this notion of faith as a precondition of salvation that Cudworth fell short of Rely's Antinomian Universalism. Indeed, Cudworth published three tracts between 1758 and 1762 refuting Rely's theory of Union: 'If universal salvation were a Truth we might as well do without any Religion at all'. (56) The writer of *The Polyglot or Hope of Eternal Life* (1761) classed Cudworth with Hervey and Marshall as asserting the right to eternal life on the

basis of Christ's imputed righteousness and justification by faith. (57) This is traditional Calvinism, and Cudworth ended his life confirming election, Grace teaching 'that it is a little flock to whom it is the Father's good pleasure to give the Kingdom; that many are called but few are chosen'. (58)

There is, then, a wide gulf between Cudworth's Antinomianism derived from Marrow doctrines of extreme Calvinism, and Relly's derived from Whitefield's implicit promise of universal salvation and his own transgression of the moral law. It seems that Calvinism alone cannot account for Relly's distinctive brand of universalism, and that his own experience was also a determining factor. Indeed, there is a highly personal flavour to Relly's indictment of the self-righteous. He surely referred to his Methodist critics when he wrote of those who 'use all diligence in back-biting, evil-speaking, censuring and condemning the sinners; raising them as many enemies as may be, daily seeking their ruin, rejoicing in their misery, and would if possible, not only rob them of their life and being here, but also sentence them to eternal death. These are the fruits of man's holiness'. (59)

Relly's approach to salvation was wholly egalitarian; the covenant was given for the people, not particular men, all are qualified by sin. (60) There is implicit condemnation of a hierarchical society based on property. 'The more modern doctrines have taught mankind to respect each other as aliens, each esteeming himself better than another; imagining he has property, distinct from his brother, yea

even in spirituals calculated to promote self-love, spiritual pride, bigotry, and hatred of each other, instead of love'. (61) Relly's salvation was sweepingly inclusive: 'Here is righteousness for you that are unrighteous; holiness for the impure in heart;..strength and victory for the weak and fearful, and rest for you that are weary;.. perfect, finished, eternal salvation for you'. (62)

It was probably the democratic principle underlying Relly's universalism that led contemporaries to link him with the 17th century Leveller, Richard Coppin, whose *A Blow at the Serpent* was republished in 1764, one of a spate of Commonwealth tracts circulating at the time. In his *Sadducee Detected and Refuted in Remarks on the Works of Richard Coppin* (1764), Relly denied any involvement in the republication, and dismissed Coppin's ideas as Manichaeian, repugnant to scripture and common sense. (63) Coppin's dualism apart, however, he had much in common with Relly in his belief that all men will be saved, his argument that Christ frees us by taking on the curse and condemnation due to us by law. (64)

Relly's contemporaries were more preoccupied with the libertarian implications of his universalism, however, than with its democratic principle. Relly's own example exacerbated the offence. The Methodist William Mason declaimed

Hence we see and hear of many who once seemed to run well in the Ways of Godliness, but Satan has now hindered by these pernicious Tenets, and they now glory in their Shame; sporting themselves with their own Deceivings: who make a mock of Sin; serious Godliness;

despise and neglect all the Ordinances of Christianity; make a banter of Prayer etc..That in the sight of God, there is no Difference between a Life of notorious Ungodliness, open Profaneness, and Sensuality'. (65)

Relly did favourably contrast 'a man living in drunkenness, whoredoms, thefts, gamings etc' with those reformed from vice but full of spiritual pride and uncharitableness. (66) He preached against celibacy on religious principles, and condemned materialistic marriage based on 'interest, money and the lust of the flesh'. 'True chastity doth not consist in a privation of love and desire towards the woman: for man was created with a capacity for this'. (67)

Relly was not preaching sexual licence however. 'Unchastity', he declared, 'consists in the irregularity of our passions, either where they incline to variety, or are inordinate towards'. (67) He himself continued to live 'with two at once' as Harris recorded in November 1762. (68) But his account of the affair in his letters suggests that his behaviour was inspired by his own standards of honour, just as his view of chastity was informed by rational, liberal principles and a morality of the good heart similar to Fielding's. (69) Both condemned the materialistic values of their society, and exalted charity as the prime virtue.

It would be a distortion of Relly's universalism to see it simply as a justification of his own position and unconventional life-style.

His whole attitude was one of Enlightened rationality superimposed on his deeply emotional commitment to Christianity. His avowed starting point in formulating his doctrine was the equity of the notion of atonement, to which he applied the same logic as rational Deists like Toland, Hartley, Voltaire or Annet. (70) Relly recognised that there was no 'justice and equity' in 'one man's suffering death. yea, even the torments of hell, for another'. It was contrary to reason, and to truth, justice, mercy and wisdom, which cannot permit the innocent to be punished. 'That system which is not founded in equity hath no exhibition of true wisdom in it' has much in common with Jeremiah White's 'the spirit of Revenge and Cruelty is absolutely evil and eternally abhorrent from the Nature of God and all good Men' - an angry vengeful God was only a projection of Man's evil passions. (71) Indeed, the years immediately preceding *Salvation Compleated* were those of the popular controversy surrounding the republication of Thomas Cuppe's *Le Ciel Ouvert a Tous les Hommes* (1750). (72)

Relly's doctrine must clearly have been as much influenced by rational Christianity as by Calvinist Methodism. Where Wesley and Whitefield emphasised the evidence of a believer's heart, Relly stressed the internal logic of his argument. His doctrine of union 'renders the system of man's redemption by his blood, beautifully consistent and worthy of its glorious author', according to our 'natural ideas of justice' which declare God to be 'holy, just, righteous, true, wise, merciful and loving etc'. (73)

Again, while Methodism strove to remain within the established church, Relly's theology belonged within that assertive sectarian tradition which rejected authority and the priesthood. His Gospel was 'plain, simple and unartificial, suited to the meanest capacity', and would be more universally known 'should mankind be released from those chains and suffered to think for themselves'.

(74) This is the populism of Peter Annet, who proposed to 'vindicate the Right which every man has, to search out and Judge of the Truth for himself, and declare it to others'; that 'each judging for himself what is right, may be brought into the glorious liberty of the Sons of God'. (75) Annet too was an Universalist, addressing a poem to Whitefield in 1739 which linked freethought, liberty, moral autonomy with freedom from the fear of hell.

Mankind is born in Ignorance at first  
But when the Soul for Wisdom is athirst  
It lives another Life, 'tis born again  
And sucks Immortal Truths with raptures in.  
Damnation Doctrine, gives him no surprise  
No horrid Hell, no Devil terrifies  
No future fears his steady Soul annoy;  
He lives and riots in excess of Joy. (75)

In asserting that the poor possess the truths of religion, radical Christianity overturned all accepted intellectual and educational hierarchies. It restated the simple principle of equality of men before God, and thus questioned differences in rank and political participation. (76) Certainly Relly preached free enquiry, liberty

and freedom from deference. His *AntiChrist Resisted in a Reply to a Pamphlet Wrote by William Mason* (1761) was addressed to 'Englishmen, Patrons and sons of liberty' and asserted: 'To think and speak for ourselves is the British charter'. (77) As well as attacking materialistic attitudes to marriage, Relly linked the necessity of good works with those same secular values of a governing class. 'Anti-Christ says, you must increase in goods, you must grow rich, rich in wisdom, knowledge, holiness, goodness, virtue and experience, and except you thus increase in goods, Christ shall profit you nothing'. (78)

In place of goods, Relly preached apostolic poverty, and a concept of liberty in which property played no part. Both Relly and Wesley wrote tracts on Christian liberty in 1776, Wesley at least in response to Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* of that year. (79) Wesley defined civil liberty as the right to 'dispose of our lives, persons and fortunes, according to our own choice, and the laws of our country'. (80) Relly's definition was more in line with Price's: 'civil liberty consists in freedom from every species of slavery: it is the birth-right of every free-born man'. (81)

Relly also distinguished religious liberty, freedom of worship, which 'also is a jewel, which cannot be too highly prized': alike with civil liberty, 'founded in right reason, and may be considered as the voice of nature'. And finally gospel liberty, 'founded in the revelation of God, in the holy scriptures' would survive, 'should



tyranny strip us under other shapes' - an allusion surely to current arguments that England risked tyranny without popular representation. (81)

Relly claimed to be investigating liberty 'as a witness of Jesus, rather than a politician', but his argument held political overtones. The main body of his sermon was a defence of Relly's doctrine of union with Christ as freeing man from the bondage of the moral law, but he counselled against licentiousness, which was 'punishable by the laws; and ..the execution of these laws is in the hands of those who are enemies of liberty'. Liberty should not be abused, but occasionally, when honour, and the progress of people, and the happiness and peace of mankind require, 'all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any'. (82)

Here Relly's Antinomian theology obviously found its counterpart in advanced political thought, and the increasingly vocal popular radicalism of the 1770s. It fitted into an Antinomian tradition that was essentially individualistic and anarchical, its pragmatism related to utilitarianism and empiricism, its guideline Nature and the supremacy of Reason. (83) It was a theology amongst all the variations on offer in Old Dissent, Methodism, and the newer sects, that best suited the aspirations of independent, self-educated City tradesmen in their struggle for political rights.

Yet however much Relly might appeal to reason and nature as the foundations of his doctrine, it possessed an essential element which

defies both criteria. There is some justification in his claim that the notion of union with Christ explains the atonement with clarity, simplicity and logical consistency. But the notion of union in itself is neither clear nor logical. Rather it derives from a profoundly mystical concept of an ontological union between Christ and man. Relly expanded the Pauline parallel to make Christ take on the seed of Abraham: 'The mystical constitution of his humanity was fallen man'; 'taking into that nature the fulness of our guilt, sin and curse..thus did he purge our sin by his own blood'. (84)

Relly gave copious scriptural evidence for this unity of Christ and his Church from both Old and New Testaments, his favourite analogy being that of the vine and its branches. As these formed one tree, so Jesus and his people formed 'one body, one man, one Christ, one elect, one beloved of the Father, one crucified, one raised and ever-living'. (85) A more significant analogy perhaps was that of the union of man and woman. The Church was the 'beloved Bride, in the perfection of beauty', who shared Christ's resurrection and was mystically quickened into life, Christ's righteousness, and his holiness. (86)

This identification of the church as the Bride of Jesus can be attributed to the influence of the Moravians, with whom we know that the Relly brothers were linked in Wales. During the Sifting Period particularly, the Moravians placed great emphasis on salvation through joyful and loving apprehension of Christ, his sufferings and atonement, using the bride analogy and kinship terminology, with

believers as brothers in the family of God. (87) Relly linked kinship ideas to marriage union in *Christian Liberty* where he argued that Christ invested us with the right and power of our redemption through his kindred relation to us as elder brother. So anxious was he to validate his theory by reference to Scripture, he appealed to the Hebrew practice of marriage to cousins. Marriage union was founded on kinship with the Jews, and with Christ and his Church.

(88)

The Moravian influence is especially evident in Relly's hymns, and his private letters are full of blood imagery: 'I long to sink with you Deeper and Deeper into the mystery of Godliness, untill we are Both swallowed up in the fulness of an Incarnate God and plunge and Swim in the fountains of his bleeding unchanging Love'. (89) Relly's long poem, *The Believer*, has some intensely mystical verses:

Of/Woman's Seed and Substance took he my whole

Humanity, my Nature fallen; and

Thus espoused me to the Fulness of his

Godhead: the Virgin's Womb mysteriously

The Bridal Chamber. (90)

There are obvious parallels here with the 'mystical humanism' of Jane Lead. (91) In *Enochian Walks with God*, Christ welcomes the seeker after the Holy Spirit as the 'Virgin Spouse' and looks to the day on which 'shall be consummated the Everlasting Marriage Feast with me thy Christ and living head'. (92) Lead's Philadelphians were also universalists, and inspired the German

founded the pietist branch of Universalism in America. Rely would not have accepted Boehme's Manichaeic dualism, but there is a hint of chiliasm in *Union* with his promise of

a land flowing with milk and honey, beauty, honours, riches, length of days, wisdom, strength, perfection of righteousness, holiness and

liberty unlimited, all divine, all heavenly glorious;

and with his apocalyptic vision of the day when

the witnesses now slain in the streets of the great city, stand again upon their feet, and the ancient testimony be revived.

Come quickly Lord Jesus. (93)

So in seeking to explain the emergence of Rely's Universalism, one must take into account the continuing tradition of Philadelphian millennialism, as well as Moravian mysticism. It primarily had its roots in Calvinist Methodism, carried to an extreme Antinomianism by Rely's personality and experience. It was deeply imbued with rational Deism and freethought, and influenced by popular radicalism. But it was its mystical humanism that lent it its peculiar dynamic. The Calvinist notion of the transcendence of God could account for Rely's emphasis on grace over works, but his theory of union with Christ put man on a level with Christ. It fused a magical, naturalistic tradition with scientific rationalism. (94)

Calvinism, Weber has argued, induces an inner-worldly asceticism which engenders an urge to prove oneself by placing one's energies at God's service in a mundane calling. (95) Rely's Universalism

produces an existential, historical and concrete view of man in communion with God and each other. Through this Universalist idea the Old Testament becomes the story of the political liberation and self-creation of man; the message of Christ offers both spiritual and temporal redemption, a 'radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation'. (96) To the City tradesmen of Relly's congregation it provided a powerful obligation to work for a just society, 'free from ecclesiastical, political, social and Satanic bondage'. (97)

## REFERENCES

1. G.M. Roberts, *Selective Trevecka Letters* (1956), p 193. DNB says about 1741, but Whitefield's visit to Wales was in 1743, A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (1980) ii p 157. The Rev. Roberts discovered a Moravian report that both James and his brother were 'awakened by John Harris of St Kenox and kept in connexion with him until..they separated and set up for themselves: 'The Moravians and John Relly and his People', *Journal of History Society of Presbyterian Church of Wales* xxxviii (1953), pp 3-7.
2. Obituary by a member of his society, Dr Williams Library.
3. *ibid*
4. *Selective Trevecka Letters* p 212.
5. Dallimore, *op.cit.* ii p 255.
6. R. Southey, *Life of Wesley* (1925) pp 162-3 for Cudworth connexion. Roberts, 'Moravians and John Relly', suggests that the Relly brothers founded a sect called the Rellites with a number of societies in Pembrokeshire.
7. *Preservative in Perilous Times*, Preface.

8. Obituary

9. *Records of the Life of John Murray* (1816) p 97.

10. Sir Walter Besant, *London in the 18th century* p 192.

11. R. Eddy. *Universalism in America* (1884) i p 115.

12. T. Whittemore, *A Modern History of Universalism* (1830) pp 45-65.

C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) *passim*, especially pp 118, 133, 165.

13. C. Hill, *op.cit.* and D.P.Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, *passim*.  
For Hartley see B. Willey, *The 18th Century Background* (1940) Ch. VIII.

14. December 1788, quoted in Whittemore, *op.cit.*, p 183, and for previous points, pp 80-1, 84, 202, 219.

15. *Union* (1859 ed.) p 54.

16. Jacques le Goff has attributed that theological innovation of the 12th century, purgatory, to the rise of a middle class or third estate; *Naissance du Purgatoire* (1981), eg pp 17, 285-315. He argues that a median category was added to the duality of rich and poor, lay and clerics, attention shifted from God's mercy to individual merit. Correspondingly a complex ternary scheme replaced the binary,

focusing on individual life, death and judgement. 'Le modele (ternaire) s'ancre solidement dans des structures socio-economiques'. Though far removed in time and social context the theory suggests some relationship between social change and developments in theology.

17. I. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform* (1962), pp 2-110. C. Robbins, *The 18th Century Commonwealthman* (1959), pp 223, 236-7, 259. A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (1979), pp 27-72.

18. J. Brewer, 'English Radicalism in the Age of George III' in J.G. Pocock ed. *Three British Revolutions* (1980), pp 328-345.

19. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), p 104.

20. Dallimore *op.cit.* ii p 35.

21. *ibid* p 559.

22. J. Downey, *The 18th Century Pulpit* (1969), p 157.

23. D. Macfarlane, *The Revivals of the 18th Century* (1830), p48. *Works* vii pp 21, 87, 310. Other examples, pp 70, 107, 224, 295.

24. J. Downey, *op.cit.* p 159. Semmel points out that 18th century Calvinism followed the moderate compromise of Richard Baxter, in



which the very act of evangelism was an offer of salvation to all;  
*The Methodist Revolution* (1974), p24.

25. *Union* p 111.

26. *ibid* p 59. *Salvation Completed* (1753) p 27.

27. *Salvation Completed* pp 228, 16.

28. C.Hill, *op.cit.* p 130.

29. *ibid passim*; G. Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History* (1951),  
pp 31-6, 67-84.

30. quoted in B. Semmel, *op.cit.* p 45, who links it with political  
radicalism. A.C. Underwood, *History of the English Baptists* (1947),  
p 128, attributes the decline of the Particular Baptists to  
Antinomianism. This kind of hyper-Calvinism was common amongst  
Independents and Presbyterians as well, *Transactions of the  
Congregational Historical Society* vi, pp 389 ff.

31. J. Telford, *Life of Wesley* (1886), p 288.

32. *Journal* iii pp 237-8. J.F.C. Harrison, *Second Coming* (1979) p  
19. Later in the century William Huntington was dismissed from the  
Greenwich Tabernacle by Rowland Hill for preaching antinomian  
doctrine, and opened his own place in Deptford. See *The Moral Law*

*not Injured by the Everlasting Gospel* (1792), *Works* vi, especially pp 41-58, where he argues that sin only has dominion over those under the law, not over those under Grace.

33. G.M. Roberts, *Selective Trevecka Letters* p 220; Obituary.

34. R.W. Malcolmson, 'A set of ungovernable people' in J. Brewer and J. Styles ed. *An Ungovernable People* (1980) p 89.

35. T. Beynon, *Howell Harris' Visits to London* (1960), pp 69, 164.

36. Trevecka Letters (National Library of Wales) f 1605 Jan. 17 1747.

37. *ibid* f 1142, April 11 1746; f 1463, May 24 1747; f 1676, July 6 1747.

38. f 1551 October 23.

39. *History of Dissenters* (1833) pp 45-6, 56.

40. f 1495.

41. f 1593 Dec.21 1746.

42. Beynon, *op.cit.* p 130.

43. *ibid* p 218.

44. f 1901 Nov. 8 1749.

45. Beynon p 254.

46. p 261.

47. see A.W. Harrison, *Arminianism* (1937) p 203.

48. *Works* (1972) vii p 349.

49. G.Rowell, 'The Origins and History of Universalist Societies in Britain, 1750-1850' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* xxii no 1, (Jan. 1971) p 49.

50. J.C. Whitebrook, *William Cudworth and his Connexion* (1919), 'A Vindication of his Life, Work and Character' (1907), *Calvinist Methodist Historical Society* iv (1918) p 24.

51. *Works* ii p 470.

52. *Aphorism concerning the Assurance of Faith* (1757) pp 15, 27.

53. *Christ the only Foundation* (1759) pp 19, 20.

54. *Works* x pp 277, 280-4. R. Finch, *A Free Examination of Mr Cudworth's Freethoughts on the Doctrines of Election, Fall of Man, and Restoration by Christ* (1747) defined Cudworth's principles as 'those that receive the Atonement, believe in Jesus, may do as they please'.

55. Whitebrook's 'Vindication'.

56. *Preservative in Perilous Times* (1758) p 21.

57. p 6. He quotes Cudworth, 'they who denied Him he would also deny before his Father' p 10.

58. *Nature and Grace, or Some Essential Differences between the Sentiments of the Natural and Spiritual Man in Things Pertaining to Salvation* (1763).

59. *Salvation Compleated* p 203. Relly's flaunting of convention in life-style as well as doctrine would have brought wholesale condemnation from his former colleagues, concerned at his example.

60. *ibid* p 53.

61. *Union* p 57.

62. *Salvation Compleated* p 225.

63. pp 47, 62.

64. *A Blow at the Serpent* (1656) pp 21,3. Coppin's contemporary William Erbery (1604-54) also based his universalism on the mystic union between Christ and man: 'the Son and the Saints make one perfect man, and ..the fulness of the Godhead dwells in both in the same measure'; quoted in A.J.McLachlan, *Socinians in 17th Century England* (1951), pp 226-31.

65. *Antinomian Heresy Exploded in an Appeal to the Christian World Against the Unscriptural Doctrines and Licentious Tenets of Mr James Relly* (1761). The Monthly Reviewers said that *Union* was 'the ignorant performance of an illiterate fanatic'; quoted in Relly's reply to Mason, *AntiChrist Resisted* (1761), p 3.

66. *Trial of Spirits* (1756), p 277.

67. *The Life of Christ: the Perseverance of the Christian* (1762). Sermon II was on the text Matt. xix 12, 'made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake', p 45.

68. T. Beynon, *Howell Harris, Reformer and Soldier* (1958) p 28.

69. see eg. Tom's lecture to Nightingale on true honour, *Tom Jones* Book XV Ch. 8; and B. Harrison, *Henry Fielding's Tom Jones: the Novelist as Moral Philosopher* (1975).

70. Whittemore, *op.cit.* pp 276, 90-1, 219.

71. *Salvation Compleated* p 228; White, *Restoration of All Things* (1712), quoted in Walker, *op.cit.*, p 111.

72. Whittemore, p 185. This provoked a number of works including *The Great Love and Tenderness of God to his Creature Man, or the Scripture Account of the Redemption, Conversion and Salvation of all Mankind*.

73. *Union* pp 69, 133. On Methodist emotionalism, L. Stephen, *English thought in the 18th Century* (1876) ii, pp 424-6, Whitefield's 'tattered shreds of sensational rhetoric'.

74. *Union* p 15; and see P. Gay, *Deism* (1968) pp 14-9; M. Fitzpatrick, 'Toleration and Truth' in *Enlightenment and Dissent* no 1 (1982), pp 3-29; M. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981).

75. *Judging for Ourselves or Freethinking the Great Duty of Religion* (1739). Annet was in correspondence with Priestley, E. Twynam, *Peter Annet* (1938), and wrote *Social Bliss Considered* (1749) advocating easier divorce.

76. M. Mullett, *Radical Religious Movements in Modern Europe* (1980), p 52.

77. *Trial of Spirits* p 3; 'O my brethren, how long will it be ere we shall think for ourselves? when shall we be delivered from the tyranny of tradition, and no longer enslaved thereby?' p 62.

78. *Union* p 114.

79. *Some Observations on Liberty Occasioned by a late Tract; Works* xi, pp 93-117. Relly, *Christian Liberty*. See Fitzpatrick and Stephen, *op.cit.* pp 3-29, 208-15 respectively.

80. p 92. For Wesley the people were a 'many-headed beast'; *Thoughts Upon Liberty* (1772), *Works* xi, p 42.

81. pp 2-3.

82. p 79. Relly published this sermon at the request of his congregation, and explained that it was not the full text, since he preached without notes - so the original may have been more overtly political.

83. G. Huehns, *op.cit.*, pp 110-122.

84. *Salvation Completed* p 186.

85. *Union* p 93. Relly actually denied that he preached universalism, arguing rather speciously that he treated of the method of salvation, not the number, but it is clear in all his writings that

universal salvation is the only possible inference, and this is how his disciples saw it; *AntiChrist Resisted* pp 15, 17.

86. *Salvation Completed*, pp 11-22.

87. G.L. Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds* (1967), pp 11-15; *Moravians, An Account of the Doctrine* (1749).

88. pp 29-32.

89. f 1696, Sep.10, 1747. Hymns are full of Bride images, eg. *Christian Hymns, Poems and Spiritual Songs* (1758), pp 4,9.

90. *ibid* p 35. The lack of regular rhythm and rhyme enhance the effect of mystery.

91. W.H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists* (1978), p 170.

92. (1694) p 13.

93. pp 144, 181. Walker, *op.cit.* on Lead, pp 221-6.

94. Jacob, *op.cit.*, pp 32-3. Relly first presented his union as a covenant between God and man, a common image to Welsh Methodists, E. Evans, *Howell Harris Evangelist* (1974), p 45. For the notion of



covenant see Semmel, *op.cit.*, p 12. The covenant image is less apparent in *Union*, where human responsibility is less significant.

95. *Protestant Ethic* pp 102-26; G. Poggi, *Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit* (1983), pp 56-110. D. Lovegrove, 'Calvinist Itineraries in England 1780-1800', Unpub. Cambridge PhD thesis (1981), argues that itinerants displayed an 'air of confidence and optimism linked with a sense of basic social and material progress', p 17.

96. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1985), pp 150-3.

97. *Chartist Circular* (Aug. 29, 1840).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE ORIGINS OF UNIVERSALIST SOCIETIES: THE MILLENNIAL INSPIRATION

The first Universalist society of which we have documentary evidence 'began to assemble about the year 1778', the year of Relly's death, according to a founder member, John Cue.(1) The coincidence of the date suggests some connection with Relly, and Whittemore alleges that his society split into two at this time.(2) But Cue makes no mention of Relly, and names instead three Anglican clergymen, a Spitalfields silk merchant, Edmund Clegg, and himself, a Swedenborgian, as comprising a group which had already been meeting in a large room near Shoreditch - presumably before Young's death in 1765. Dr Edward Young, Bishop Newton and the Rev. Richard Clarke, late Rector of St. Phillips, Charleston, S. Carolina are the clergymen named, and all are known for their interest in mystical religion and prophecy. Their universalism derived from a much more sophisticated intellectual tradition than Relly's Calvinist Methodism, a mysticism which took Law and Boehme as inspiration, and used a tradition of Renaissance thought that flourished in the 17th century.

The distinctive features of this mystical religion were its emphasis on the inner spiritual life and its ardent belief in the power of prophecy. Its roots lay in a Neo-Platonist tradition relating to supposedly ancient texts of Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus and Pythagoras that derived from Moses and were thought to have given Plato his religious truths. This tradition combined Christianity with the Jewish Cabala, natural magic, astrology, alchemy and numerology on the assumption that deep truths must be hidden in allegory. These truths related to the millennium and the Second Coming of Christ, the reformation and renewal of the world, and the salvation of the faithful.(3) It was a syncretist, tolerant and liberal theology that was well suited to the predominantly rational and liberal religious climate in England in the late 17th and 18th centuries. Neo-Platonist theosophy provided a coherent explanation of man's place in creation at a time of scientific investigation into the natural world. But it reduced the universe into spiritual essence, inverting the logic of materialists who reduced all into natural origins. Essentially rational, it was also romantic, furnishing a vehicle of protest against the prevailing materialism, Deism, and general indifference to the interior life.(4)

Two concepts fundamental to this mystical religion were predestination and universal salvation. Predestination fitted the Old and New Testament texts, and corresponded to the psychological character of mystical experience, its 'given' quality. Pauline Christology and Neo-Platonic emanationism led naturally to universal redemption: it followed

inevitably from the notion of man as microcosm. Jeremiah White argued that each Soul was a Unity, a Shadow of the Supreme Unity, so no individual Soul could ever be abandoned; we are members one of another and of the body of Christ. Love, not justice, was the supreme attribute of God, and his love consumed sin, purified and regenerated Souls. (5) The views of White and the Cambridge Platonists were absorbed by the Philadelphians in the early 18th century, together with those of Boehme and the continental mystics. The 'original society of Universalists' was to call itself Philadelphian, and continue their dynamic combination of chiliasm and universal salvation, their vision of the urgent necessity of reforming society. (6)

Of the three clergymen named as originating the Universalist society, Young and Newton were presumably members of the Shoreditch group only. Edward Young (1683-1765) gives some indication of universalist beliefs in his *Night Thoughts* (1750).

Heav'n is all Love: all Joy in giving Joy:

It never had created, but to bless:

And shall It then strike off the List of Life,

A Being blest, a Worthy so to be?

Heav'n starts at an annihilating God.

If Man's Immortal, there's a God in Heaven

(God could not will destruction his creation) (7)

There is reference to Neo-Platonic theology in his 'man, Divine Miniature of Greatness, absolute', and to the 'Wisdom of Heathen Antiquity'. Samuel Richardson criticised him for linking Adam with Pallas: 'Has not Milton too often mingled the Christian and Pagan theologies?'. Young's *Last Day* presented an universalist millennial vision highly congenial to Americans - it was reprinted there several times between 1786 and 1797. It ends with a triumphant humanist affirmation of man: 'For whom these revolutions but for man?...Think deeply then, O man, how great thou art'. (8) Young evidently admired Richard Clarke, and requested the publication of his *Essay on Number Seven*. (9)

Bishop Thomas Newton (1704-1782) was chiefly remarkable for his sustained efforts for self-advancement, his multiple benefices, and his far right political views, regarding the parliamentary opposition of 1780 as the most unprincipled and factious ever known. It was said that he considered the whole duty of a clergyman to hunt for preferment by flattery. He did however express universalist views in his *Dissertation on the Prophecies which have been remarkably Fulfilled* (1754) which was evidently much admired by London society. It was so good that Dr Johnson questioned whether it was Newton's own work. There is a good deal on the evidence for the imminence of the millennium, but as the work was dedicated to the Archbishop of Canterbury, he was careful to emphasise the fire and brimstone awaiting the profligate and immoral before the second resurrection. (10) It seems

unlikely that he would have been present at meetings of the society, although Cue claimed that 'several clergymen of the Establishment as well as Dissenting Ministers were often present'.<sup>(1)</sup>

The doyen of the original society of Universalists was clearly Richard Clarke, and his copious writings and letters afford illuminating insight into the fusion of religious and political beliefs which characterised these Universalists. Clarke's mystical religion and faith in the literal fulfilment of Biblical prophecy was shared by his protege, Elhanan Winchester, who did so much to increase Universalist membership and political involvement in the years 1787-94, and by James Purves, who founded the Scottish society at this time. They preached a millennium that would herald a new and heavenly earth for all, the true end of the providential plan being universal restoration. Their vision of the perfect society involved radical social and political change. These Universalists developed an ancient millennial tradition in a dynamic reciprocal relationship with secular political thought.

The Rev. Richard Clarke (1719?-1802) was a Hebrew scholar and Cabalist in the tradition of Francis Lee; one of a circle of William Law's disciples which included Thomas Langcake, John Byrom, the Scottish mystic George Cheyne, James Hervey, the Swedenborgian Thomas Hartley, and the Universalist James Stonehouse.<sup>(11)</sup> Clarke was probably educated at Philip Doddridge's Northampton Academy, which would help to explain

his liberal theology and interest in Jewish mysticism.(12) The Northampton Academy curriculum included Watts' logic, rhetoric, geography, metaphysics, algebra, geometry, Newtonian science, natural and experimental philosophy, ecclesiastical history, Jewish antiquities, divinity and preaching. Its spirit was broadly Evangelical, transcending denomination and rank, promoting free enquiry and a deepening sensibility in religion.(13)

In 1753 Clarke was sent to the colonies by the evangelising Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which represented the moderately High wing of the British evangelical movement, that included Methodists. He became Rector of the leading Church of England parish in Charleston, S.Carolina, where he gained the reputation of an unusually tolerant and eloquent Anglican clergyman, with exceptionally good relations with local revivalists, sharing his pulpit with Calvinist evangelists despite Anglican opposition to the Awakening.(14) On his return to England in 1759, Clarke became Curate of Cheshunt and later lecturer at Stoke Newington from about 1769-1776.(15) He may have returned to America in the 1780s, and thereafter devoted his time to preaching universal restoration, supporting himself and a large family on a small legacy from his brother, and teaching Hebrew and the classics.(16)

Clarke remained an Anglican all his life, but a letter to Henry Brooke in 1772 shows him to have taken up a very independent, non-sectarian position reminiscent of the Levellers.

I have no connection with any party, or systems which are still adhered to, by which both the letter and the spirit of the sacred oracles are depressed and subjected to men...The religious societies cling to the doctrines of men, who are not themselves enlightened, and therefore cannot understand the very language of the scripture, expressing states and processes of the soul. (17)

Underlying this position was the Christian Cabalist belief that when God gave the Law to Moses he gave a second revelation as to the secret meaning of the Law. Out of this had developed a theosophical mystique involving an elaborate search for hidden meanings in Scripture and elaborate manipulation of the Hebrew alphabet - the holy language in which God spoke to man.(18)

Clarke placed himself in line of descent from the Cambridge Platonists, naming as his immediate forebears More, Cudworth, Sterry, Gell, Ramsay, Cheyne and Hartley.(19) His two most substantial works, *The Gospel of the Daily Service of the Law* (1767), and *Jesus the Nazarene* (1795) argued complex correspondences between the Old and New Testaments 'to open the most principal and leading Truths of Revelation'.(20) Using his gift of prophecy, Clarke offered an 'Interpretation of the Spirit of the Letter of the Scriptures', explaining the 'Types and Shadows of the Tabernacle and Temple by the Spirit and Truth of the corresponding



Antitypes... which Jesus builds in Man'.(21) Thus Aaron was the shadow of Christ, the twelve tribes of the disciples, the visible and temporary Heavens and Earth of the Glory of the new, and the mystery of fire and blood corresponded to the Fire that consumes sin, a fire that is the love of God.(22) Very soon, the Law and the Prophets would cease and the Everlasting Gospel remain; the Feast of Trumpets on the First Day of the Seventh Month was near. In *Jesus the Nazarene* 1805 was calculated as the time of the slaying of witnesses.(23)

In fact all Clarke's writings were designed to proclaim the imminence of the millennium and the restoration of all things. He claimed that the Spirit of Prophecy had been opened in him in 1757 (24), no doubt under the influence of the intense millennial speculation in the American colonies. The 1750s were years of great eschatological expectation, and it has been argued that the extent and diversity of millennial literature suggests that a broad spectrum of American society entertained millennial ideas.(25) One of the most widely printed publications appearing in Philadelphia, Boston and Charleston was Clarke's *The Prophetic Numbers of Daniel and John Calculated* of 1759. This was apparently stimulated by *The Strange and Wonderful Predictions of Christopher Love* which was republished in that year. Love had acquired a hallowed reputation as martyr to the Parliamentary cause, and his supposed predictions of earthquakes in the 1750s gave the work wide credibility. Clarke pointed to the close correspondence between their dates, and made sensational predictions of an imminent

millennium in which the excessive worldiness of the age would be destroyed.(26)

*Prophetic Numbers* was followed in rapid succession by *An Essay on Number Seven* (1759), *A Second Warning to the World by the Spirit of Prophecy* (1760), *The Gospel of the Daily Service of the Law* (1767), and *Signs of the Times* (1773) Soon after this Clarke described himself as a 'member of the Philadelphian Church, which believes and openly professes faith in the Restitution of all things'.(27) After Roach's death in 1730, a small group of serious-minded tradesmen continued to meet as a Philadelphian society in Bow Lane Chapel near Bread Street.(28) Their leader, Allen Leppington, had some contact with Law, but it seems unlikely that Clarke could have been a member of that society. Rather he seems to have used the term Church in its figurative sense.

as to the Church of Philadelphia (the love of all men as brethren)..has had but little strength in every age yet witnesses it has had, called wicked, abominable and blasphemous heretics...it is now but a small cloud or like its blessed head a little stone of no price, yet it does grow and will grow, till it fill the whole earth with the voice of the Everlasting Gospel which I have proclaimed here and abroad for more than thirty years...Let us, brethren of this church,not be ashamed of being reproached.(29)

Clarke's theology, Neo-Platonic and Behmenist, and his emphasis on universal restoration, obviously had a close affinity with that of the Philadelphians, Jane Lead, Francis Lee, and Richard Roach.(30) Like Roach, Clarke aimed to confirm the doctrine of universal redemption by the Bible and Behmenist theosophy, and set the prophecies firmly in the context of secular society.(31) But while Roach discerned the signs of the times in material and cultural progress, peace, good government, and the 'continuance of Liberties and Properties and the free Exercise of Religion', Clarke fulminated against the social, moral and political evils of British society.

He foretold that 'this corrupt and degenerate Nation' would be 'changed in life and manners', 'reformed in Church and State' by 'so much rough discipline' as 'shall cure the spiritual and political Diseases of her Sons and Daughters'. Commerce, national Avarice and Luxury would disappear when the East and West Indies, 'two great sources of voluptuousness' were sunk by earthquakes. And in a specific attack on taxation that characterised the popular radicalism of the 1760s he predicted that 'God will break the Iron Governments of unjust Nimrods, who lay heavy Burthens on the Sweat and Toil of their oppressed Subjects in Babylon'.(32)

Underlying this apocalyptic denunciation of worldliness and injustice was a socialist vision of common ownership of material goods. In 1772 Clarke wrote to Henry Brooke that he looked to the coming of a 'true

community of spirit' which 'will open a community of temporal things, as in the seventh year of the Lord, who never made the proud distinctions and divisions which the babel of the world made, for they all partake of Nimrod's character and cannot bear the equality of the brethren'.(33) Philadelphian brotherly love was his prescription for the ills of the world; the Rich and Great were castigated for their huge consumption of wealth and neglect of the poor.(34)

Equality and community of goods had been a dominant theme of Commonwealth millenarians and was common to most American prophetic writings of the 1770s.(35) It accorded with the developing legacy of 17th century political thought and especially the argument of Locke in his *Second Treatise on Government* that equality of property in the state of nature was proven and established. And of course it was widely interpreted as the theme of the Jubilee of Leviticus 25, in which the occult philosophers found much of the second secret revelation. (36) The 'seventh year of the Lord' to which Clarke refers in his letter to Brooke was the year of liberty and restitution to the dispossessed. Thomas Spence was listed in Clarke's posthumously published *Prophetic Records of the Christian Era* (1812), and commended, even though his proposals were impossible 'under our present system of corruption'.

but though no Agrarian Law should ever be introduced  
in Europe or in England it shall not be thus in the  
New Jerusalem that is still coming down from above:(37)

As early as 1783 Clarke was writing about

agrarian law, as I may call it, in a political view, as the year of jubile, when the restitution of lands under mortgage and a temporary disinherison were to return back to the families.(38)

Clarke's universalist millenarian vision fused biblical religion with Enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality, and natural rights. For many in England in the 1790s the French Revolution brought confirmation of biblical prophecies. The ex-radical William Hamilton Reid described the fusion of religious and political ideas in that decade.

Incredible as it may appear, they are all looking forward to a millennium of their own; blindly insist that civil society is in a progressive state of improvement, to which every government by its weakness and crimes, is unavoidably contributing; the final end of which will be the dissolution of them all...man and nature to be perfect in all their relations...live without government, laws, submission.(39)

Even the usually pacific Quakers adopted 'political (democratic) principles'(40), and Job Scott of Providence in Rhode Island addressed the yearly meeting of 1793 on the 'great commotions then prevalent in Europe'(41).

Clarke read the signs of the times as an injunction to evangelism, and by 1790 was preaching universal salvation so fervently that 'sectaries were ready to tear him out of the pulpit'.(42) So powerful was his conviction of universal brotherhood and the imminence of the millennium, he was prepared to endure hardship and persecution. In 1793 he wrote to Brooke,

These wars will, I am fully persuaded, be the last, but apparently most ferocious and sanguinary. Rulers and priests move everywhere to support unreasonable power and religious superstitions; but it will be in vain, though the filth and offscouring of all things. I have been in prison for the cause, and have been stript of all things for the Lord's sake, my relations put me in a madhouse privately, where I stayed six weeks.(43)

Mystical religion, with its emphasis on the inner spiritual life and individual sensibility, does not obviously promote social activism. Clarke's mentor, William Law, shared his Behmenist theosophy and belief in universal restoration, but criticised his Hebrew symbolism, and used his pieces to kindle his fire.(44) Most mystics attacked post-millennial theology, and Clarke always claimed that the new Jerusalem would come by supernatural, not human means. But millenarianism lent urgency to the Puritan craving for reformation and renewal, and the occult philosophy gave those with a gift of interpretation a special responsibility to share their secret knowledge.

Clarke was perhaps more occult philosopher than mystic, including the study of alchemy in his search for secret knowledge and spiritual enlightenment.(46) His conviction of his divine gift of prophecy, and his radical political and social beliefs derived from an Enlightened reinterpretation of the Bible produced a dynamic universalist theology that was to prove the basis of social action.

This dynamic interaction of radical political principle with mystical Behmenist theosophy also characterised the universalism of Clarke's protege, the American evangelist Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797). Clarke published his *The Outcasts Comforted* in 1783, and its universalist views were warmly received by the London society. When Edmund Clegg, the silk merchant, went over to Philadelphia to found a manufactory, he called on Winchester and preached for him. In 1787 Winchester arrived in England with an introduction to Clegg's brother John. By 1793 he had a 'large and respectable congregation' at Parliament Court Chapel in the City.(47) It was Winchester's achievement to make universalist doctrine accessible to London tradesmen. His was essentially a logical, rational interpretation of the scriptures. Cue wrote

There was no other person who publicly, and with the same perspicuity, was able to state and defend it: for though the doctrine was believed, and well understood by several before he came to England, ...yet there generally, among all the possessors of it, was a degree of obscurity in the statement

of it, which hindered its progress.(48)

Like Relly, and probably Clarke too, Winchester came to his universalism through Behmenist mysticism, but from a basis of Calvinism. Born in Brookline Massachusetts, to a 'respectable and industrious mechanic' of fervent piety and Welsh descent, he attended common school and taught himself French, Greek and Hebrew. By 1769 he was a convinced Calvinist, and in 1774 he became minister to a community of Baptists in South Carolina, where he gained the reputation of an 'eloquent and popular' preacher.(49) Here he came into contact with slavery, and it was his ministry amongst slaves that convinced him that universal restoration was consistent with strict Calvinism. 'Before he was aware, he was preaching a general provision and a universal call' to congregations of nearly a thousand.(50)

Winchester himself set his conversion to universalism in 1778, to his reading of *The Everlasting Gospel* by the German pietist Georg Klein-Nikolai under the pseudonym of Paul Siegvolk, and Stonehouse's *Restitution of all Things*.(51) He followed this up with a visit to German Universalists in Pennsylvania, the Dunkers, descendants of German Philadelphians converted by the writings of Jane Lead. His sermon of 1781 announcing his conversion to universalism, *The Seed of the Woman bruising the Serpent's Head*, contains Behmenist concepts like the principles of fire, water and nature.(52) This led to his being dismissed from his ministry of the Free-will Baptist Church of



Philadelphia, but he did make a number of converts, including Dr Benjamin Rush, lecturer in medicine at the university of Philadelphia, and signatory of the Declaration of Independence. When Winchester left for England in 1787 Rush gave him a letter to his friend Richard Price.(53)

Winchester arrived in England with an introduction to radical circles, sharing their liberal theology and democratic principles. He was apparently coolly received at first, but took the opportunity to visit Price, Priestley, Wesley and Belsham, and preached for a year at the Unitarian chapel in Worship Street.(54) His eloquence attracted much attention, and after a number of moves from Petticoat Lane to Store Street to Southwark, he established a congregation in a former General Baptist chapel at Parliament Court, Artillery Lane, in the City in 1793. Significantly he described the congregation as 'Philadelphian'.(55) Meanwhile he made several missionary journeys through the Midlands, East Anglia and Kent, writing to Benjamin Rush in 1790 that many doors had opened for the universalist gospel, especially amongst Baptists and Presbyterians.(56)

The new Philadelphian church professed as its guiding principle the brotherly love transcending religious denominations that had inspired the earlier Philadelphians, as well as their belief in universal restoration. Proclaiming these principles, the *Philadelphian Magazine* of 1788 acknowledges the Universalists' debt to 18th century freethought

and rationalist philosophy with a quotation from Locke to Toland on the worth of religion in a dying hour, and to mysticism with an extract from Henry Brooke's *Fool of Quality*. But these first issues of the organ of the Philadelphian Universalists are dominated by Winchester's millennial beliefs in the literal fulfilment of prophecy. In them he serialised his *Course of Lectures on the Prophecies that Remain to be Fulfilled*, in which the divine purpose is related to the contemporary political situation.

Like most mystics, Winchester was a pre-millennialist, insisting on supernatural, not human agency. But he was also a fervent Republican, and his universalist millennial vision incorporated Enlightenment ideas of natural rights and freedom, relating them to specific social and political institutions in England and America. His hymns of 1774 described the British measures as a plot by 'Rome and Hell', and his revivalist preaching in South Carolina asserted that the millennium would bring for the poor satisfaction of material needs. *Outcasts Comforted* inveighed against his ecclesiastical oppressors with warnings of divine retribution.(57) *Lectures on the Prophecies* made vague reference to the 'Haughty Monarchs of the Earth', enemies of God, who would be banished along with 'all injustice, iniquity, tyranny and oppression', and offered an egalitarian vision of all men in the family of God who would return each to his possession in the Jubilee year.(58)

*Century Sermon on the Glorious Revolution* of November 1788 offered an opportunity to celebrate the 'inestimable liberties and privileges' consequent on that event. Winchester particularly extolled freedom of the press, 'the great palladian of liberty', which rendered all ranks, from highest to lowest, 'capable of knowing their native rights, of asserting, contending for, and maintaining their freedom'. This manifesto of civil rights was followed by an explicit attack on the condition of dissenters in England, comparing it unfavourably with that in the United States, and urging a liberal philosophy of government that merely protected 'all men in their enjoyment of their equal and inalienable rights'. So closely was Winchester's millennium integrated to secular society, he ended his sermon with an impassioned comparison between William III and Christ. Christ was infinitely superior, not only because of his divinity, but because the blessings of the Gospel far surpassed all earthly advantages; the certainty of Christianity was as dependable and authentic as revolution, and infinitely more important.

The French Revolution naturally confirmed Winchester in his expectation of an imminent millennium. In October 1790 he wrote to Brooke of 'the kingdom of God which I trust will soon appear'.<sup>(59)</sup> In November 1791 Benjamin Rush wrote to Winchester

I contemplate with you the progress of reason and liberty in Europe with great pleasure. Republican forms of government are the best repositories of the Gospel.<sup>(60)</sup>

Civil liberty, the enjoyment of essential human rights, was seen by both as the essential prelude to the second coming, the rule of Christ on earth. The American and French Republics were part of the divine plan.

In his *Oration on the Discovery of America* of 1792 Winchester claimed that the United States could teach 'grand and important lessons': republican government, freedom of conscience and worship with equality of denominations, death sentence commuted to hard labour, equal citizenship for Jews, and milder and more equitable government. Soon the world would learn and practise these lessons in a still more perfect manner. *The Three Woe Trumpets* of 1793 identified the earthquake prophesied in Revelation 11 with the fall of the French monarchy, and the 'slaughter of the names of men' with the destruction of the prerogatives of the privileged orders in France. In the 'new and very important period now beginning', Christ's government would bring peace, health and plenty, especially to the poor and needy. These sentiments so much accorded with Priestley's that he claimed that 'these sermons had given him more knowledge of the present times, than all the books which he had ever read upon that subject'.<sup>(61)</sup> In his 1794 Fast Day sermon, *The Present State of Europe compared with Ancient Prophecies*, Priestley specifically approved Winchester's notion of the French Revolution as herald of the millennium, and commended his sermons as 'deserving of consideration of all Christians, who are attentive to the signs of the times'.<sup>(62)</sup>

By the spring of 1794 Winchester was at the height of his fame and popularity, elated by the evidence around him of the imminence of the millennium. In March he wrote to Rush

Great events seem hastening on; almost all Europe is in a flame; the vials of wrath are pouring out, and preparing the way for the kingdom of the Lord, and may it come speedily.(63)

He was planning another missionary tour to his growing congregations in Kent, the Midlands, and East Anglia, when without warning on 1st May, he left his house one morning and took ship for America. He explained in a letter that he had been driven out by his wife with blows and the 'most opprobrious language', comparing his sufferings with those of our Lord.

Thus on Sunday last night I have been thought one of the happiest mortals, all things were pleasant; we rode in state, conducted in a chariot to a place of worship, attended by crowds, borne upon the wings of faith and love, and all the scene was charming... on Thursday and Friday I was crucified to the world and the world to me.

Aware perhaps of the improbability of his story, Winchester went on to plead

you must believe that I received the greatest of

insults and provocations, that should have induced me to leave the idol of my heart, and a thousand friends, a most respectable situation, a good and comfortable living, house and home, books, papers, cloathing etc. besides such an amazing prospect of usefulness.(64)

In a later letter of November 1794 Winchester admitted that

The most common conjecture was that I had fled from persecution for fear of being taken up by the government for publishing my oration on discovery of America or my sermon on the Three Woe Trumpets.

But I have always had the satisfaction of telling all that have asked me, that the government of Great Britain never concerned itself with me, and that I never gave the government any umbrage.(65)

Popular opinion evidently recognised the subversive quality of Winchester's beliefs even if he did not. There seems little doubt that he never intended to preach political activism, but rather a passive reliance on divine intervention. So closely were his radical political views integrated to his universalist millennial vision, he naively ignored their impact upon a government determined to suppress expressions of sympathy with the French Revolution. His writings

differed little in kind from those that sent Joyce, Wakefield and Flower to prison, and caused Priestley to flee to America.

But perhaps the very unlikeliness of his story suggests that it was indeed the explanation for his flight. This was his fifth wife, three having died in childbirth and one from breast cancer, but he was probably too wrapped up in his mission to gain experience in wife management, and volatile theatrical personalities seem particularly vulnerable to domestic pressures. Winchester was apparently reconciled to his wife, and continued to preach, writing in 1795 *A Defence of Revelation* in answer to Paine's *Age of Reason*, in which he reaffirmed the link between prophecy and the French Revolution. 'The present revolution in France, and the total destruction of the names of all men, all titles of nobility, and all the religious orders' were plainly forecast in the books of Revelation. This Biblical endorsement of equality was reasserted in *A Plain Political Catechism* of 1796, in which Winchester set out his philosophy of Republican government, erected by free consent and the choice of the majority, its true design to protect lives, liberty and property. Despite several hundred letters from his English congregations pleading with him to return, he remained in America and died in 1797 aged 47.

Winchester's legacy was a flourishing church of Universalists in the City of London, with branches in the provinces, all ardently committed to an universalist millennial vision of the brotherhood of man, and the

imminent arrival of a just, free and equal society of peace and plenty for all. Simultaneously with these English groups, and in correspondence with them, a Scottish universalist church had developed from the same combination of antinomian Calvinism and mysticism, the same interaction of radical Enlightenment ideas and neo-Platonic theosophy.

There had been some resistance to Presbyterianism in NE Scotland in the 17th century, and in the early 18th a small mystical group of educated and leisured Aberdonians had developed links with the Philadelphians, and corresponded with Law.(66) Their most distinguished member, Chevalier Ramsay (1686-1743), incorporated gnosticism, neo-Platonic astrology and metempsychosis, and chiliastic intensity to preach a doctrine of universal restoration of all men and animals.(67) But the direct antecedent of the Scottish Universalists was the Antinomian Calvinist James Fraser of Brea, whose *Treatise on Justifying Faith*, dating from the 1690s, was revived and republished in 1743. His 'Marrow' doctrines were adopted by a minority of the Reformed Presbytery, established in 1743 to continue the Covenanters' struggle against the 1690 Revolution Settlement, and the imposition of the prayer book. These 'original Dissenters' continued the tradition of the 'poor, wasted, misrepresented remnant of the suffering Anti-Popish, Anti-prelatic, Anti-Erastian, Anti-sectarian, true Presbyterian Church in Scotland'.(68)



This universalist 'Remnant' came from the part of rural Berwickshire known as the Meuse, always strong Covenanting country: its main communities the villages of Duns and Chirnside. They were organised in small groups and linked by correspondences and general meetings. Like the London Universalists, they emphasised free enquiry into the scriptures, without the restraints of human creeds, and like them, they made no separation between spiritual and material life. From the Covenanters they retained a tradition of opposition to civil and ecclesiastical authority, accepting only Christ as head of civil and religious concerns.(68) The leader of the Duns group was James Purves (1734-1795), son of a shepherd, who joined the secession church in 1755. In 1763 the Berwickshire societies sent him to Coleraine to consult with Irish societies of similar views. Purves was apprenticed as a wheelwright, but in 1769 he was chosen public preacher, and sent to Glasgow University, where he learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew to enable him to read the scriptures in the original, and settle doctrinal interpretations for himself. In 1771 Purves drew up a statement of principles for the Berwickshire societies, high Arian in theology, but distinctive and controversial in its stress on free enquiry. By 1776 a group of these Berwickshire tradesmen determined to seek their fortunes in Edinburgh New Town, and Purves accompanied them as schoolmaster and later printer and bookseller. They set up the first Universalist church in Scotland, styled 'the successors of the Remnant who testified against the corruption of the Revolution Constitution of the Church of Scotland'.(69)

1776 was of course the year of the American Revolution that served to confirm millennial hopes of the imminence of the second coming. In 1777 Purves published his own interpretation of prophecy, *Observations on Prophetic Time and Similitudes*, which combined antinomian opposition to civil authority with the neo-Platonic symbolism of Ramsay. Its stated objectives were the characteristic Enlightened ones of enlightening the mind, improving life and morals, and 'administering Comfort and Support to such as look and wait for the Salvation of Zion'. Like Clarke and Winchester, Purves was convinced of the imminence of the millennium, and like Clarke he argued from a complex interpretation of numerology to specific dates and political events.

The tract begins with the Pauline call to action, awaking from sleep, casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armour of light. Then in specially cast Hebrew letters the name of the Beast is shown to be Royal Supremacy in Great Britain, the corresponding letters in the English alphabet being R SUPREMESI. These are the initials for Rebellious, Supremacy, Usurped Prerogatives, (supported by) Rapacious Emoluments, producing Mutilated Equity and Sordid Injunctions.

The first three terms are explained by the antinomian Covenanting argument that

It is Rebellion against the Kingdom of heaven to take the management of his Church without his consent, and use it against his command; yet this is done in Britain

by the royal supremacy; in regulating the affairs of the Church, and imposing pastors upon the people against their choice.

Usurped prerogatives are those 'that are held without right'. The arguments for the other terms invoke Enlightened ideals of equity and natural justice, and the secular grievances of tradesmen.

The heavy taxes imposed upon the people to support luxury and venality are rapacious emoluments. Equity is mutilated, in the substitution of human laws instead of the Divine, etc. All acts and proclamations enforcing cruel measures, and oppressive exactions may be called sordid injunctions.

The dates leading to the millennium are set in the calendar of the Remnant, but linked to mystical interpretations of the Old Testament and to contemporary political events. The evening of the first day began at the Revolution, the second in 1707 with the desertion of some Covenanters to the Presbyterian Church, the third in 1750 with the formation of the Reformed Presbytery. 1766 brought the realisation that the universality of Christ's mediating office meant that all authority for the execution of any office, religious or civil, must be derived from him. The qualifications for civil rulers had been prescribed in Exodus, Deuteronomy and Samuel, their manner of administration in Deuteronomy, and the manner of appointment by the choice of the people. The important events in the American colonies in that year showed that

the British Empire was the 'last persecuting power' of the prophecy in Daniel, and that it was certain to be abolished.

This assertion of individual autonomy and democratic control of civil rulers, explicit criticism of oppressive taxation, is very little removed from the language of the seditious pamphlet which caused Purves' friend and correspondent, Thomas Fyssh Palmer, to be transported to Australia in 1794. The text cited at his trial as a powerful incitement to 'discontent and disorder' ran

The House of Commons, once the only security from  
the evils of tyranny and aristocracy, is against you,  
placemen and pensioners destroying its independence.  
We must assert our just rights, and privileges as men,  
chief of which is universal suffrage. Reform of the  
House of Commons is founded on the eternal basis of  
justice, fair, free, and equal.(70)

The weaver George Mealmaker who wrote the pamphlet was one of the tradesmen described as having been instilled with notions 'as the meaning of the word Liberty and Equality is nothing else that an equal distribution of property, a relief of Taxes and such other Stuff'.(71) Purves could well have been accused of investing such radical principles with scriptural authority.

Like his fellow Universalists, Clarke and Winchester, Purves found his millennial beliefs confirmed by the French Revolution. In 1791 he

published his sympathetic response to this under the title *A Treatise of Civil Government*, using the barely efficacious pseudonym of Sevrup Semaj. But while all three millennial founders of British universalism found confirmation of Biblical prophecies in political events, their primary motive remained essentially spiritual. Clarke, the occult philosopher, used his divine gift of prophetic exegesis to disclose to the world the second revelation of human brotherhood and universal restoration. Winchester, the rational Christian, argued from the fulfilment of the prophecies that the Bible was true, that reason did not conflict with revelation. Purves did adapt his millennialism to the special needs of his fellow tradesmen, but emphasising freedom of worship. All wrote within a mystical tradition permeated by secular ideas of liberty and human rights. Their progressive, this-worldly, optimistic message provided a concrete, rational explanation of events in a time of social and political crisis. It incorporated a vision of a just and equal society, with the promise that it was about to be realised. Passive and determinist that vision may have been, but it included quite specific political and social demands. For the tradesmen who comprised the three original Universalist societies, it presented an invitation to regenerate the world with their own efforts.(72)

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30. See N.Thun, *Behmenists and Philadelphians* (1948) pp 73-90, 108-18, 131-8. R. Maxse, *The Reception of Jacob Boehme in England* (1934) pp 49-58, on the reinterpretation of Boehme by Law. J.Lead, *Enochian Walks with God* (1694),p 16, *The Revelation of Revelations* (1683), *The Heavenly Cloud now Breaking* (1681), pp 8-10, all use the same fire symbolism, but emphasise individual spiritual regeneration.

31. cf Roach, *The Great Crisis or the Mystery of the Times and Seasons Unfolded* (1725) esp. p 10, *The Imperial Standard of the Messiah Triumphant* (1727) p 212
32. *An Essay on the Number Seven* (1759). Compare the contemporary (1764) *Paradise Restored* of Clarke's fellow mystic Thomas Hartley which similarly deplores the decline of faith and love, 'Philadelphianism', while denouncing unlawful combinations between traders to raise prices, adulteration of food, and corrupt practices in public justice.
33. Walton Ms I 1 43 pp 280-2
34. *ibid* and *Signs of the Times* (1773)
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37. pp 355-8
38. *On the Altar of Brass* (1783). That such ideas were current amongst liberal churchmen is suggested by the question of Spence's pastor, James Murray, as to whether the Jewish Jubilee was a levelling scheme,

Chase p 50, but Chase claims that Spence did not use the term Jubilee until after the Revolution, p 52.

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70. M.W.Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (1912) pp 70-85.

Palmer, Unitarian minister in Dundee, corresponded with Purves 1785-7

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71. K.J.Logue, *Popular Disturbances in Scotland 1780-1815* (1979) p149

72. There is no evidence in their writings to support the Thompson thesis of popular despair, *Making* pp 411-40 or Hobsbawm's notion of millennialism as popular protest, eg *Primitive Rebels* p 64. None of them were preaching to 'deprived' groups.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PARLIAMENT COURT SOCIETY

The three British Universalist societies were founded at the time of the American Revolution, a decade in which political hope was increasingly linked with eschatological expectation. Confident of the inevitability of human progress towards a more perfect society, and of perfect restoration after death, these Universalists were committed to social, and often political, action. A study of their writings and activities in the following decades reveals the extent to which Universalists contributed to social and political reform, and the extent to which Universalist ideals helped to shape popular radicalism. (1)

A study of the two London societies must inevitably focus on the Parliament Court chapel, because the Rellyan Universalists left so little by way of chapel records or publications. Whittemore claims that they moved in 1797 to the Philadelphian Chapel, Windmill Street, Finsbury Square - later to be the home of Baume's infidel Optimist Society, and the National Union of the Working Classes. (2) The Rellyans are the only Universalists listed in John Evans' *Sketch of the Denominations of the Christian World* of 1814, in which a 'respectable member' furnished an account of their practice and

principles. (3) Evans noted that the term 'Antinomian' had been bestowed on them, and this may account for the apparent absence of contact with Winchester's group. (4) There was a wide theological gap between Relly's universalism derived from antinomian Calvinism, and that of the respectable scholarly millennial tradition. But by the 1820s theological origins had become less important than the Trinitarian Unitarian divide, and the Rellyans became closely linked to Trinitarian Universalists in London and Scotland. (5)

What little evidence remains of the Rellyans' political and social ideas suggests that they too were involved in the radical movement. Three ministers preached to the society in the first decades: James Rait, pastor for forty years until his death in 1819, Coward and Jeffreys. (2,3) In 1796 John Coward published a treatise directed at the Bishop of Llandaff's response to *Age of Reason* entitled *Deism traced to its Source*. A Baptist minister, Coward based his argument on the Rellyan principle of the union of Christ with man affirmed in the Bible and given immediacy by the intense millennial expectation of the revolutionary decade. He cited

the glorious Revelation of divine goodness, by which man  
without exception has been brought out of all his  
misery - delivered from condemnation- rescued from all its  
consequences, namely death and the grave, made a conqueror  
over both in the person of Christ, his head and  
representative, and shall also in his own person attain  
the same happy resurrection, being seated with him  
already in heaven by virtue of his union with human



\_\_\_\_\_ nature, and soon to follow personally to possess those abodes of felicity which Christ...is gone to take possession of. (6)

From this certain expectation of universal restoration, Coward drew political ideals of brotherhood, liberty and equality, even while apparently endorsing civil obedience.

How strong a claim then does Christianity lay for the exercise of brotherly kindness and charity to the meanest of mankind. How does it banish pride and level all distinctions in the sight of God who sees not with the eyes of man; and whilst it enforces order and submission to lawful authority, it teaches both governors and governed to love one another. (7)

Submission to lawful authority is then brought into question by an explicit condemnation of religious discrimination, and an implicit attack on abuses in the political system.

as we do not judge of the original purity of the principles of the British constitution from the abuses or corruptions which at any period may have taken place in the administration of government, so it would be equally illogical and absurd to form an opinion of the pure principles of Christianity, as taught by the apostles of Christ, from that corrupt mass of Antichristian error, that lust of ecclesiastical power and dignity, that cruelty, persecution, and

those scandalous abuses, which at sundry times and in divers manners, have crept into, corrupted and debased the visible church. (8)

There is evidence that such principles found expression in political action in at least one member of the Philadelphian Chapel. The master carpenter, Henry Medler, is singled out for mention in the spies' reports of 1819 and 1820. He was one of the post-war Watsonite group, involved with the Spenceans and the cooperative movement, and later a regular speaker at the Optimist society meetings. (9)

The link between universalist beliefs and radical politics is much more extensively documented for the Parliament Court Universalists. Their chapel records combined with other contemporary evidence afford a fairly clear picture of their membership and type of leadership, and their publications give an insight into their social and political concerns. The society remained a focus and forum for advanced social and political thought throughout the repression of the 1790s.

The Parliament Court chapel was built by Winchester's followers in 1793 with a capacity to seat five hundred. Its facade still exists, a listed building in Artillery Lane, opposite Liverpool Street station. (10) It was clearly then not an insignificant sect, and even that generous capacity was often inadequate to house the crowds attending. (11) The 'large and respectable congregation' seems to

have been almost exclusively tradesmen, some fairly wealthy. (12) A Register of Births for 'the universal Baptist Church at Parliament Court, Artillery Street, Bishopsgate', from 1795-1811 lists some thirty families, almost all of them from a small area in the City and its environs: Aldgate, Cripplegate, Norton Folgate, Bishopsgate, Stepney, Spitalfields, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Shadwell, Mile End, Clerkenwell and Islington.

Just three families lived apart, in Southwark and Newington Butts, presumably converted during Winchester's tenure of a chapel in Borough before the move to Parliament Court. Of these Catherine Edney was the daughter of John Marsom, Unitarian bookseller and preacher with the General Baptists. (13) The evidence suggests a homogeneous social group with an economic base in the City of London; its interests those of the petty bourgeois class - peace, the reform of corruption and abuses, the abolition of sinecures, tithes and income tax. (14)

The minister to succeed Winchester at Parliament Court was also a tradesman: William Vidler (1758-1816), a Sussex stonemason turned bookseller and Particular Baptist minister. The tenth child of an Anglican stonemason, Vidler had spent a sickly childhood reading theology and oratory, Biblical languages and the 'logical arts'. He was converted to Calvinism by George Gilbert, 'Apostle of Sussex', who founded a community in Battle in 1776. Vidler became minister of this community, which grew to around fifty by 1779, and in 1780 he joined it to the local Particular Baptist Association. He

supplemented his salary of £17 with bookselling, including apparently among his customers Tom Paine, then resident in Lewes.

Vidler's biographer recounts a story of mob violence (probably in 1791, the year of 'Church and King' riots) when Paine was burnt in effigy and the crowd demanded whether Vidler was for Paine - to which he replied that he had 'no liking for pain, I am for ease'. (15) The anecdote is designed to illustrate Vidler's wit, but the implication it half conceals is that he had some local reputation for radical sympathies. At any rate, he had been developing doubts on the Godhead of Christ and the eternity of hell torments as early as 1784, and in 1792, enthused by the works of Winchester, he led his congregation of some 150 into the universalist faith. This led to his expulsion from the Particular Baptist Association, but he continued to maintain his Baptist links in London, rejoining the General Baptists in 1801. One of the strengths of the Universalists was their strong consciousness of religious fellowship, and this was a powerful element in their dissemination of radical ideas. Most of Winchester's early converts in London, the Midlands, East Anglia and Kent were Baptists and Presbyterians, and close links between the three denominations persisted in London at least.

Vidler was evidently a popular choice as Winchester's successor, a vigorous evangelist who allegedly attracted crowds to his chapel, and whose sermons were the talk of London. His salary increased from £30 a year initially to £250 in 1801, an indication of a much

expanded congregation. (16) His friend Robert Aspland said of him in his funeral oration that

As a preacher he excelled chiefly in strength of reasoning, simplicity and perspicuity of style and an open, manly elocution. His voice was clear and strong, his attitude erect and self-possessed, and his person dignified. He would sometimes indulge in the pulpit in an ironical turn of expression, which produced a striking effect. (16)

It is a catalogue of virtues designed to appeal to a group of independent tradesmen already attracted to universalism by Winchester's views on the rational improvement of society.

At the time of Vidler's appointment to Parliament Court, London was at a high pitch of radical excitement. By early 1795 'numbers of the thinking part of working people' had joined the London Corresponding Society, and some of the 'better off in the world' as well. (17) High food prices and food shortages intensified the popular demand for parliamentary reform and an end to a 'cruel, unjust and unnecessary war'. Later associates of the Parliament Court society, William Frend, Jeremiah Joyce, William Sturch and Samuel Goodbehere, were active in the LCS at this time, and there is listed a man by the name of Thompson as leader of Division 13 who might have been the Universalist Samuel Thompson, later notorious for his radical activities. (18) Whittemore presents persuasive evidence in support of his claim that all the leading Unitarians

held universalist beliefs, and of course Gilbert Wakefield, Flower, Jebb and Frend were prosecuted for radical opinions. (19)

The Two Acts and arrests of some two hundred went some way to check the momentum of the popular movement by the end of 1795, but it has been argued that it survived Pitt's terror unimpaired. (20) In these years of government repression, the Parliament Court society played a key role in disseminating radical ideas and encouraging free debate. There is even some evidence that the Universalists continued their association with the LCS and were involved in the attempt to reestablish links with the provinces. In May 1797 an emissary from the LCS arrived at the Edinburgh society of Universalists with a letter from Vidler inquiring after them, reporting on the London congregation, ordering copies of their late minister's books (the radical James Purves) and enclosing a character reference for Jamieson. Jamieson evidently preached at the society, and then borrowed fifteen shillings to go to London in 1799, joined the Friends of the People in Glasgow, and later became a government spy. (21)

It was in the medium of print however that the Universalists were most effective in promoting radical ideas. The furor over the first part of the *Age of Reason* provided an ideal opportunity for linking religious beliefs to a political context. Some fifteen replies to the *Age of Reason* were published in 1794-5, including the Unitarian criticisms of Wakefield and Priestley, and Winchester's *Defence of Revelation* which achieved two editions in America in 1795. There was

special concern over the political implications of Paine's book. The Bishop of Llandaff, who wrote the Latitudinarian Anglican response, linked it to 'democratic insanity, which would equalise all property, and level all distinctions in civil society'. (22) Winchester and the Unitarians, on the other hand, shared most of Paine's religious and political views, but were irritated by his errors and lack of scholarship. The English edition of *Defence of Revelation* published by Vidler in 1796 was as much an Universalist political testament as a critique of deism.

Vidler introduced it as 'calculated to serve the cause of God and truth in general' and regretted that Christianity had 'appeared in its connection with the crooked politics of this world, with which it was never intended to be united'. Yet he emphasised the imminence of the second coming, which Winchester argued throughout the work to be affirmed by the evidence of the French Revolution. In Letter V he argued that the Bible is consistent with truth and moral justice on the proof of God visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children in the French Revolution; the dreadful crimes of the barbarous Louis XIV, 'especially his bloody persecutions against innocent Protestants' visited upon his descendants, and the priests and nobles of France, because they approved the deeds of their fathers and did not repent.

In Letter VIII Winchester adduced *Age of Reason* itself as proof of the 'constant and exact fulfilment of prophecy' which foretold an age of infidelity. It would be used by God to destroy popery, which

in turn would be destroyed by the coming and kingdom of Christ. If Paine had only attacked the Romish Church he would have performed noble service, worthy of the 'cause of liberty which I myself love as well as you can'. And indeed, Winchester explicitly aligned himself with Paine's politics while gently correcting his misapprehensions concerning the Bible. Paine was 'that great political writer, who wrote *Common Sense*, the *Rights of Man*'. 'O had he kept to politics, and not attempted to meddle with religion, until he understood something about it'. He signed himself, 'Your sincere friend, Elhanan Winchester'.

The Universalist fundamentalist belief in the literal truth of scripture was obviously inimical to Paine's deism, but it does seem that associates of the Parliament Court society were involved in the publication of *Age of Reason*. HD Symonds of Paternoster Row, who sold *Defence of Revelation* along with the Universalist booksellers Vidler, Teulon and Scarlett, and their friend Marsom, had been sentenced in 1792 to four years in Newgate and £200 fine for publishing the first part, and pirated the second part in 1795. Daniel Isaac Eaton, who has been identified with the Freethinking Christian branch of the society, brought out a cheap edition in 1796. Eaton's *Politics for the People* of 1794 demanded an advanced programme of social and political reform on the basis of something very like Universalist principles. He claimed that Christianity could be seen as teaching the equality of man, the folly of titles, the corruption of commerce and the rich; as urging the community of goods, the need for simplicity and austerity, the abhorrence of



luxury, hypocrisy and the clergy, contempt for worldly wisdom. Christ was the greatest Reformer, preaching the universal fraternisation of all mankind, the abolition of wars, and the approach of the millennium. (23)

There is further evidence that the Parliament Court society was part of the London radical circle in their identification with the *Monthly Magazine* established in 1796 by Richard Philips, with contributions from George Dyer, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thelwall, Frend and Thomas Holcroft. Universalists appearing in the publication include Henry Fearon, Vidler, Richard Wright, and an anecdote on Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol, with his arguments for universal restoration and the fulfilment of prophecies. Millennialism was highly fashionable, and even respectable dissenters linked it to political reform, as the attorney Nash affirms in his Reply to Burke's *Reflections*.

I, of course, live in the hope of better things; a millennium (not a fifth monarch, Sir, of enthusiasts and fanatics), but a new heaven and a new earth in which dwelleth righteousness; or to drop the eastern figure and use a more philosophic language, a state of equal liberty and equal justice for all men'. (24)

The main vehicle for the promotion of Universalist ideals however was the *Universalists Miscellany or Philanthropists Museum* which Vidler launched in January 1797, to promote 'peace, humility and universal benevolence'. It was one of a hundred new religious

periodicals launched between 1790 and 1825, but the only one devoted to free enquiry. The largest in circulation, power and influence was the Calvinist *Evangelical Magazine* (1793), Dissenting and Evangelical. Robert Southey in 1808 dismissed its contents as 'offal and hogswash' but admitted that it was a 'powerful engine, the most powerful in this country'. It eschewed politics and concentrated on spiritual matters. The liberal *Christian Miscellany* which replaced Priestley's *Theological Repository* in 1792, with contributions by Wollstonecraft, Priestley and Lindsey, lasted only eight months. Most liberal of all, with genuine political comment, was the *Protestant Dissenting Magazine* (1794-9) run by three denominations and including Unitarians like John Evans, John Marsom, Abraham Rees and Joshua Toulmin. (25)

The *Universalists Miscellany* claimed to give better paper and print than any other periodical, and half a sheet more of letter-press to each edition. (26) Selling at 6d it compared favourably with current newspapers which provided four pages of advertisements and London and foreign reports for 7d. (Cobbett's *Political Register* first sold for 1s ½d). (27) In its second year, at the request of several correspondents, Vidler allotted two or three pages to monthly occurrences, both foreign and domestic, which would provide 'a brief view of the times without the trouble and expense of frequently consulting newspapers'. (27) Thus the *Universalists Miscellany* became a vehicle for political comment as well as for the expression of radical religious views.

The periodical's avowed purpose was to provide a forum for debate to 'all serious enquirers after truth'. Its critics alleged however that it afforded more space to freethinkers than to traditional Christians. The Anglican Jerram wrote

A blasphemous deist, and an indecent socinian, have free access incognito to this publication; but one who calls in question the dogmas of universalists cannot be heard without giving his name. (28)

Jerram presented a detailed critical analysis of Vidler's argument in his serialised debate with the Calvinist Andrew Fuller, and declared him guilty of 'misrepresentation, sophistry, illiberality, affected candour, pretensions to great learning'. (29) Fuller himself alleged that Vidler associated with 'Deists, libertines, Mr Barbauld, the Monthly Reviewers, nominal Christians of loose character'. (30) And certainly the *Miscellany* featured some advanced religious views including those of the Swedenborgian John Cue, the freethinker Samuel Thompson, and the charismatic ex-Methodist minister, JH Prince. (31)

The theology that dominated the publication however was the millennial universalism of Elhanan Winchester. The intense interest in millennial speculation had continued in England after 1792, coming to a head in 1795 with a flood of pamphlets supporting or rejecting Brothers' claims. But that interest abated after the winter and his committal to an asylum, and when it revived after 1800 with Joanna Southcott it abandoned the political dimension. (32) The *Miscellany* on the other hand firmly placed the millennium

in the context of contemporary events. The January 1798 edition carried 'Reflections upon Prophecy' which instanced the French Revolution as evidence of literal fulfilment, and expressed radical opposition to the war with the claim that any attempt to establish kingly power on the continent would be fruitless. This was reaffirmed in December of that year, with calculations for the years in which the Beast should reign.

The language in which the millennial predictions are expressed is so reminiscent of Thomas Spence as to argue some connection between him and the society. We know that Richard Clarke admired Spence and that Universalists were associated with the Spencean group that began to meet after 1801. (33) The Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy, 1801, evidently believed that Spence's followers set out to enlist 'every class of interested and visionary Reformers in his doctrines of Partition of Property and Propagation of religious tenets...which lead to the abrogation of all Restraint from temporal Authority'. It alleged that the 'Doctrine of the approaching Millennium has found many converts, encouraged by the godless leaders of the new Association', and claimed that its object was to 'exterminate Royalty, Nobility and Property, for the purpose of an equal Parochial Division of the Profits of Lands, as the basis of a 'beautiful and powerful new Republic'. (34)

The *Miscellany* has references to the 'grand jubilee which encloses and compleats the whole'; the 'trump of jubilee shall sound and tears wiped from every eye'; the 'millennial age when universal

peace shall prevail, men employing themselves in cultivating the earth and the knowledge and righteousness of Jehovah shall cover the whole world'. (35) The Spencean ideal of early Hebrew society as a self-regulating association of equals is implied in an article on the 'Antiquity of the Universal Doctrine' which traces it to the Israelitish nation. God gave Israel everything necessary to happiness: laws, system of worship, a 'perfect system of liberty and equality of rights and privileges'. As some were likely to sacrifice their patrimony, the law of Leviticus 25 decreed a full restoration to every man of his liberty and possessions in the year of jubilee, and complete civil restoration every 50 years. (36)

Liberty, both civil and religious, was a principle regularly endorsed by correspondents. In June 1797 a 'Constant Reader' in an 'Essay on Liberty' distinguished four liberties, physical, moral, religious and civil, all sharing the idea of self-direction or self-government, freedom of will, without which man was but a 'poor abject animal, without rights, without property, without conscience'. It began,

The present day is a day of liberty, and it is natural  
for every intelligent mind to espouse her cause, and  
be averse to Slavery'.

This was followed in July by 'Ode to Liberty', which sadly exemplifies the standard of poetry contributions.

How awful is that nation's lot  
By whom their precepts are forgot  
Soon to lawless rights they run

Soon by folly they're undone.

Civil liberty was also a major theme of the monthly occurrences. In April and May 1798 there are reports of the Livery of London petition to the King, and the censure of ministers, and in July of the LCS assembly on St Pancras field, the petition to the King, and the subsequent arrest of the principal speakers. In February a letter from John Thompson of York announced with approval that on one market day 4000 copies of *Age of Reason* had been distributed *gratis* to local farmers and labourers. In August there is a critical reference to the American Congress' restraints on the liberty of the press - its progress in Denmark having been applauded in July as a fruit of the 'predominant political spirit of the age'. August too brought correspondence from an Universalist in Massachusetts reporting progress in the number of communities there, with the comment: 'There a native spirit of liberty, operating with a just poise of social rights, expands the mind and renders opinions independent'.

Political comment in 1798 also included an account of the trial of Wakefield for his answer to the Bishop of Llandaff on the *Age of Reason* (February) and in October another report on the increasingly radical livery of London.

Yesterday Alderman Coombe was elected Lord Mayor of the City of London, after a contest between the court of Aldermen and the Livery, which for spirit and propriety of conduct in the latter, will scarce ever be forgot.

The Unitarian wine-merchant Joseph Holden was probably already connected with the Parliament Court society, and he was particularly responsible for the election of the Foxite Coombe. (37)

The endorsement of civil rights and liberties was extended to the rights of women by Richard Wright in March and April, 1800. Wright (1764-1836) was the son of a Norfolk labourer who had been minister of a small group of Johnsonian or Sabellian Baptists in Wisbech, and left with some of the congregation in 1794 to become an Unitarian. His acquaintance with Vidler began in 1797 through letters to the *Miscellany*, and they became firm friends, united by their 'ardent love of liberty and free enquiry'. (38) Wright was a frequent contributor to the magazine, and preached at the society. Like Vidler, his social and political ideals were the inevitable outcome of his religious beliefs. He claimed that the New Testament was calculated to secure and promote true civil rights and liberties, and rational liberal principles. The Christian's duty was to reform abuses and corruptions, not with violence, but by promoting knowledge, virtue, candour and charity. (39)

Progressive ideas on women's rights had cohered into a distinct political position with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792, and Spence had argued for it in his *Rights of Infants* of 1797. (40) The *Miscellany* featured a 'Panegyric on Woman' in 1799 which must have raised a few feminist hackles. It declaimed

Enchanting Woman! thou balm of life! soother of sorrow!

..Without thee how heavily would man drag through a dreary world. But if the white hand of a fascinating female be twined round his arm, how joyous, how lightly, doth he trip along the path! (41)

In contrast, Wright argued for the natural equality of women on rational and empirical principles. He dismissed the 'too common and degrading opinion that the souls of women are naturally and necessarily inferior to those of men'. Education alone was responsible for sex and class differences. It was

an evident fact that the inequality which appears in the progress of the sexes, in mental improvement and intellectual attainments, is entirely the effect of the different systems of education which have been applied to each....otherwise she might have shone with equal lustre in the world of literature and science, instead of being a helpless dependent and mere appendage'. (42)

Such Jacobin principles of natural rights and universal equality were unique in the publications of 1800. The *Miscellany* probably did not have a very wide readership, but it promoted advanced social and political ideas at a time when government repression inhibited their expression. (43) It presented political and social comment at a price an artisan might afford, and it kept alive the notion of an imminent millennium which would bring a perfect society here on earth. The fulfilment of prophecy in current political events was further advertised in the publication in 1799 of Winchester's *The*



*Universal Restoration exhibited in a Series of Dialogues between a Minister and his Friend*, and in 1802 by Nathaniel Scarlett's *A Scenic Arrangement of Isaiah's Prophecy*, designed as a 'guide to instruct in what manner to understand those prophecies that are not fulfilled'. At the same time universalist doctrine was disseminated to the poor in *An Address to Candid and Serious Men* (1798) sold at 2d. Vidler ascribed this to a society of young members, united in encouraging small tracts to be sold cheap or given away to the poor. (44)

It was perhaps inevitable that a society dedicated to liberty and free enquiry should experience a good deal of disagreement amongst its members, and by 1800 the Parliament Court chapel suffered two major secessions. The first was the more radical group under the wine-merchant (or gin-shop keeper) Samuel Thompson, who took itself off in 1799 and set up as an independent 'true Church of God'. The second, in 1800, was led by a Spitalfields weaver, William Edmunds, who set up a Philadelphian society committed to Trinitarian beliefs. (45)

Vidler had long held doubts on the divinity of Christ, and his growing friendship with Richard Wright pushed him further towards the Unitarian position, which he openly espoused in 1801. With the Trinitarian secession, Vidler lost his more affluent members, and his salary dropped from £250 a year to £30, though it soon began to revive under his 'fiery and provocative sermons'. However, Vidler remained the acknowledged head of British Universalism, and between

1802-5 helped to establish Universalist societies in Northiam, near Boston, Lincolnshire, Rye and Steyning in Sussex, and an Universalist-Unitarian one in the North Marshes of Lincolnshire.

(46)

Each of the three branches of the Parliament Court society continued to promote radical social and political ideas as intrinsic to their universalist theology. The group remaining in the chapel under Vidler now called themselves Unitarians but they became distinctive in Unitarian history for their social and political activism. Their universalism brought a special emotional dynamic to rational Christianity.

## References

1. See eg. DG Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (1974) pp 34-8, on the link between political hope and belief in universal restoration, and JA Hone, *For the Cause of Truth* (1982) p3 on the ideological impetus to radical activity in Commonwealth and Enlightenment ideas.
2. *Modern History of Universalism* p299
3. pp 241-253
4. Relly is not named amongst the list of writers in their publications, and Clarke made a possible reference to them in *A Second Warning to the World By the Spirit of Prophecy* (1760) denouncing 'Antinomian tenets reviving'.
5. One of the Parliament Court group became minister to the Rellyans, and Relly's works are listed in the library of the Glasgow Universalists, see below.
6. p 30, DNB
7. p 39
8. p 43

9. Prothero identifies Henry Medler as a member of the Philadelphian chapel, *Artisans and Politics* (1979) p 260. For spies reports see PRO HO 42/189, IS to Conant nd and 5 July 1819; 42/190 Henley's deposition; 44/5 Henley 2 Mar. f 42; 40/33; Place Collection set 61 f 16

10. RB Aspland, *Memoir of Life, Works and Correspondence* (1850) p 325. Benjamin Goodier, weaver and pupil at Aspland's Academy, preached there in 1813, noting with some awe 'some powdered heads assembled'. I. MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (1986) p 41, saw it as a synagogue, but it is currently being converted to other use.

11. Whittemore, pp 286,292 - not of course an unbiased source.

12. *Universalist Miscellany* ii (Dec.1797) p 47. (June 1797) refers to 'some of the great and rich folk belonging to our meeting, such as do not love everybody'.

13. Aspland, *Memoir* p 47. Register of Births. PRO RG 4/4369

14. JR Dinwiddy, 'The Patriotic Linen Draper', in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 46 (1973) pp 72-94. AD Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (1976) pp 68-85.

15. FW Butt-Thompson, *History of Battle Baptist Church* (1907) p 39. Much of the material on Vidler is from this, supplemented by MD

Conway, *Centenary of South Place Society* (1894) pp 7,16,20; R Garnett, *Life of WJ Fox* (1909) p 36; CA Howe, 'British Universalism 1787-1825' in *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* xvii, no 1 (Sep.1979) pp 1-11, *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* i,iv,xvii.

16. Conway, p 16

17. Hone, pp 4-5

18. For Thompson, M. Thale ed., *Selections from the Papers of the LCS* (1983) pp 175, 305, 330; Frend, p 56; Joyce, p 130. For Sturch and Goodbehere, Hone pp 24,26,36,117,161,173 etc; Joyce p 139; and Frend *passim*. For Frend see also Add Mss 27,808, f 62; 27,817 f 44; Lovett 27,812 f 6; Joyce 27,816 f 340.

19. Whittemore, pp 253-275. R. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (1938) pp 102-120. CG Bolam, ed. *The English Presbyterians* (1968) pp 236-8.

20. C. Emsley, 'Repression, terror and the rule of law in England during the decade of the French Revolution' in *English Historical Review* Vol. C, no 397 (Oct. 1985)

21. AM Hill, 'The Successors of the Remnant' in *TUHS* xvi no 3 (Sep, 1977). There was a Robert Jamieson on the LCS General Committee, Thale pp 365, 392. Clearly the Universalists maintained their LCS

connection despite WH Reid's assertion that it lost its Dissenting members over *Age of Reason*; *Rise and Dissolution of Infidel Societies* (1800) p 109. See too Thale p xvi and EP Thompson, *Making* (1968) p 163

22. FK Prochaska, 'Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* Revisited' in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (1972) pp 561-76. See too Reid on debating societies, pp 5, 9-12, 22-3; E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels* (1974) pp 28-9.

23. I. McCalman, 'A Radical Underworld in Early 19th Century London', unpub. PhD thesis, Monash, 1984. Symonds was later prosecuted for printing and publishing bawdy works, McCalman, 'Unrespectable radicalism: infidels and pornography in early 19th century London', *Past and Present* no 104 (Aug. 1984)

24. *Monthly Magazine* i, p 32; ii p 811; v p 83; xiv p 453; xvi p 262.

25. FE Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent* (1944) pp 48, 64-78. *The Tribune* (1795) published Thelwall's lectures which included near Socialist economic and social ideas, Thompson p 175.

26. Preface to vol. 1 p 1

27. WH Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press* (1928), pp 30, 52

28. Scrutator, *Letter to an Universalist containing a Review of the controversy between Mr Vidler and Mr Fuller on the doctrine of Universal Salvation* (1802) p 8.

29. p 178

30. Vidler's Foreword to Winchester's *The Universal Restoration Exhibited* (1799) describing the progress of universalism, and the debate with Fuller.

31. See eg. Thompson on the divinity of Christ, Nov. 1797- April 1798. Prince published an autobiography entitled *The Life, Pedestrian Exercises, and Singular Opinions* (1806) in which he claimed to be a Genuine Eccentric, member of the Society of Eccentrics. He had practised thirteen trades before becoming a Methodist preacher when he participated in love-feasts and exhortations, p 155.

32. C. Garrett, *Respectable Folly* (1975) pp 191-213; JFC Harrison, *The Second Coming* (1979), pp 76-85

33. See Clarke's *Prophetic Records* (1812) p 357; McCalman, 'A Radical Underworld' pp 114-120. M. Chase, 'The Land and the Working Classes: English Agrarianism circa 1775-1851', unpub. PhD thesis Sussex, 1984, p 82, claims that there is no evidence of a Spensean society in the 1790s.

34. pp 2, 116, 158, *Reports* vol iii, 155
35. *Miscellany* i pp 500-3, 538
36. iv pp 140-1
37. Hone p 130. Place had a poor opinion of Coombe, considering him weak and easily imposed on. Add Mss 35,144 f 38.
38. Wright. *A Review of the Missionary Life and Labours* (1824) p 54.  
S. Mews, 'Reason and Emotion in Working-Class Religion 1794-1824' in *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest, Studies in Church History* ix (1972) ed Baker. p 365.
39. *Christianity Consistent with the Love of Liberty and the Assertion of Civil Rights* (1825) pp 1, 36.
40. Chase p 70; B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983) pp 1-36.
41. *Miscellany* iii p 156.
42. iv pp 109-135
43. Emsley, *op.cit.*, pp 816-9, finds that all the Jacobin newspapers had been silenced by the second half of the 1790s, by the threat of prosecution and intimidation.



44. *God's Love to his Creatures Asserted and Vindicated* (1799).

45. Journal of James Edmunds, William's son, in family possession.

46. Howe p 5.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS UNDER VIDLER

The secessions from the Parliament Court society enhanced the political as well as the doctrinal divisions between its members. The radical wing under Samuel Thompson continued to develop Winchester's millennial universalism on Spencean lines to form links with Jacobin elements working for revolutionary change. Vidler's Unitarian Universalists became aligned with Utilitarian rational Dissent, more upper class and respectable: the Unitarians at Essex Street under Theophilus Lindsey, and the Unitarian wing of the General Baptists at the Gravel-pit, Hackney, and Worship Street, Islington, under John Evans. Lindsey had gathered a wealthy and distinguished congregation which included the Duke of Grafton, future Duke of Norfolk, and several MPs.(1)

Rational Dissent had gone into eclipse since the death of Price in 1791, and the departure of Priestley for America. The accession of liberal Anglicans like Joyce and Frend, radical enthusiasts who had suffered imprisonment for their writings in the 1790s, brought new political energy to the Unitarians. Now the Universalists were to

contribute their dynamic emotional assurance of future happiness and progress towards a more perfect society. Together they were to become the social and intellectual leaders of reform.

The alignment with the Unitarians changed the basis of Parliament Court political philosophy from millennialism to Utilitarianism. This was immediately apparent in the *Universalist Theological Magazine* which replaced the *Universalist Miscellany* in 1803. Only one article on prophecy in relation to the French Revolution is featured, and although there is a hint of millennial language in the reference to the destruction of titles and ranks, the main argument is purely secular and determinist in that this followed inevitably from the oppression of the court and the growing knowledge and resolution of the people.(2)

The magazine still took as its primary aim free discussion by persons of all denominations, but its political message now centred on a morality of happiness and human improvement. An 'Essay on the Nature and the Value of Liberty as Essential to Happiness' argued that Christianity directed us to assert our native freedom and guard against abuses, and demanded free enquiry, the right to judge for ourselves, and education to understand our rights.(3) For Priestley, with his determinist philosophy, goodness and happiness were synonymous, and it has been alleged that his greatest happiness principle inspired the Benthamite creed.(4)

But such formulations were common currency in the 18th century, and human happiness had always been central to Unitarian, and Universalist doctrine. Bentham was probably more indebted to Beccaria, whose ideas on punishment accorded so well with Universalist ones, and to David Hartley's associationist psychology, which had formed one of the intellectual arguments for universalism. There was nothing religious about Bentham's philosophy, but its principles accorded so well with Universalist beliefs in material improvement and social reform, it was absorbed apparently effortlessly into the political outlook of the Parliament Court society.<sup>(5)</sup> The adoption of Utilitarianism into its Universalist creed accentuated the drift from a standard of morality based on the will of God, to one based on the will of man.

An obvious explanation for the change in philosophical emphasis is the closer contact with Unitarian radicals. Of these, two Baptists were to assume prominent positions in the society, David Eaton and Robert Aspland, who joined with Vidler and Wright to found the Unitarian Evangelical Society in 1804. Eaton came from Brechin in Scotland, and had been apprenticed to a shoemaker in York, where he became a Methodist. He broke with the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion when he began to have doubts on the atonement, and became a Baptist, but proving too liberal for that society, left for London in 1802.<sup>(6)</sup>

Aspland (1782-1845) was also an universalist, already persuaded that the 'notion of eternal torment is a libel on the character of the God

of Love and Father of Mercies'.(7) He was the son of a radical shopkeeper from Wicken, Cambridgeshire, a 'true patriot, and steady and open in his attachment to the cause of reform', 'an avowed enemy to parochial tyranny...friend to humanity and the poor'.(8) The young Robert read *The Age of Reason* in 1796, expressed 'anger and detestation' at the trials of Gerrald and Muir in 1798, and in 1799 carried the congratulations of the Cambridge patriots to Thomas Hardy on his acquittal.

With that radical pedigree it is not surprising that Aspland was already committed to working for the improvement of society as a necessary extension of his religious beliefs. In 1800 he wrote to his parents

Good works are I will not say, the evidence of religion; they are religion itself; they alone can profit our fellow creatures.

In 1801 Aspland became General Baptist minister to a liberal congregation in the Isle of Wight. His first public statement of his social and political beliefs was his Fast Day sermon of October 19th, 1803, when England was threatened with French invasion. It was published at the request of his congregation by the radical Cambridge bookseller, Benjamin Flower, who had been imprisoned in 1799 for publishing Wakefield's *Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff*.

Aspland blamed the present crisis on the oppressions practised by national governments upon their subjects.

Government designed to be the instrument of justice, the bulwark of civil security and freedom (was)..perverted by these powers to the destruction of the rights and enjoyments of mankind.

The alliance of the Christian religions with the civil power was another evil which provoked calamities. The British government in particular was guilty of the wrongs in Ireland, the subjugation of the E.Indies, eagerness for war, the countenance given to slavery and the slave trade, the multiplication of oaths, and the severity of the penal laws. Penal reform was of course a major Benthamite concern, and in the previous year Burdett had made it a political issue with his exposure of the treatment of the LCS and United Englishmen held without trial in the Coldbath Fields prison.(9)

The sermon was welcomed by Vidler in his *Universal Theological Magazine* as 'greater than them all', for others had also seized on the opportunity of the Fast Day to make a social statement, among them Lindsey, Toulmin, Joyce and Wright.(10) Wright's sermon, *The Duty of Christians to Seek the Peace of their Country*, was also published, and sold by Vidler, Symonds and Marsom. It took the characteristic Universalist line that only religion could create moral change, unify society, break down established structures of self-interest, and bring about the major changes needed to realise the good society.(11) Wright claimed not to advance a political programme, but to offer instead Christianity, a 'perfect system in itself'.

Christianity was calculated to improve all human institutions, and to renovate the world 'by enlightening mankind, by teaching the principles of justice'. He offered six practical expedients for promoting 'the continuance of order and peace among the people of Great Britain', and peace abroad: example; education to enlighten mankind and accelerate the progress of knowledge; the cultivation of virtue, loving one's neighbour and promoting the Gospel to make men wise, virtuous, free and happy; prayer; and report.

This last category apparently consisted of extolling the virtues of the British constitution, its government by law, its civil and religious liberties, protection of property, trial by jury, liberty of the press and of speech, of trade and commerce, and the cultivation of arts and science.<sup>(12)</sup> Wright explicitly rejected as unchristian the currently fashionable practice of blaming ministers and the corrupt House of Commons for the misconduct of the war. He adopted instead the other fashionable notion that only a free Britain could resist foreign invasion, listing all those rights and privileges that had been called into question by the suspension of Habeas Corpus, and the censorship of the press. The detail here anticipated Cobbett's polemic in *Political Register* of September 1804, which made much the same points, and accused the ministry of endeavouring to create discontent and disloyalty amongst the people.<sup>(13)</sup> Wright was promoting radical ideals while affirming that rational Christianity was the only source of moral improvement.

In 1804 Wright, Aspland, Eaton and Vidler took steps to put their ideals into practice by founding the Unitarian Evangelical Society, designed to take rational religion to the poor. In 1806 the Universalist Fund was set up to finance it, and Joseph Holden, the radical Unitarian wine-merchant active in City politics attended its first meeting on February 11th.(14) Wright took off on lengthy missionary tours while Aspland became increasingly outspoken in linking Christianity to civil rights and liberties. His sermon of 1804 to his new congregation at Norton on 'The Revolution of 1688 unstained by Blood' was on the theme of civil rights secured through a desire for religious liberty.

Men's religious fears prompted their desire of political change...

the freedom of their consciences and the glory of their God

impelled them to assert their civil and domestic rights.(15)

In June 1805 Aspland was invited to become minister of the Gravel-pit Hackney, and from then onwards allied himself closely with the Parliament Court society.

The society's commitment to radical politics was significantly reinforced when Aspland agreed to take over the editorship of their journal from the beginning of 1806. Renamed *The Monthly Repository*, it became a vehicle for advanced social and political ideas - to the extent that the *Christian Remembrancer* commented in 1825 that 'the Universalists are a political rather than a religious sect'.(16) It was avowedly Benthamite in philosophy. After 1811 each volume opened with a quotation from Jeremy Bentham:



To do something to instruct, but more to undeceive, the timid and admiring student; to excite him to place more confidence in his own strength, and less on the infallibility of great names; to help him to emancipate his judgement from the shackles of authority. (17)

But Benthamite views are apparent as early as 1807:

The whole business of life is a competition between individual and individual, to procure as great a portion of happiness as can be compassed by a single effort; and it is the superabundant quantity that is produced by the single struggle, and found more than sufficient for individual use, that constitutes the public good. (18)

From its earliest issues the *Repository* was unashamedly a political Dissenting magazine. The first editions included contributions from the Unitarian radicals Benjamin Flower, editor of the *Political Review* and Jeremiah Joyce, leading member of the SCI, and renowned for his address to the Scottish martyrs and a sermon which described the war against France as 'a war which has for its object ... the total subjugation of the HUMAN MIND'. (19) In March 1806 'Gogmagog' (probably David Eaton) contributed an article 'on the study of politics'. He claimed that he had joined the Dissenters expecting them to value civil as well as religious liberty, and had found a 'greater degree of information and good sense with regard to constitutional liberty, and a more zealous concern for it' than in any others. Many Dissenters were averse to

politics, but irrationally so. 'Thus to censure and oppose the reigning administration is to be political, to support and flatter them..not so'. It was only those with a 'regard to the liberty of the people, slavery' that were dubbed 'political'.(20)

The Parliament Court society firmly identified itself with the opposition to the government, and radical Westminster. The *Repository* printed Aspland's obituary sermon for Fox, published at the unanimous request of his congregation. Aspland endowed the Whig politician with all the highest Universalist ideals. Fox had been

a zealous and steady friend to the liberties and happiness of the people; his ardour in the sacred cause of freedom never carried him at the same time, beyond the limits of moderation. He was at all times the advocate, in the senate, of justice and humanity. He was in all occasions the steady promoter of peace. (21)

The society's interest in radical politics was catered for in the *Repository* by a monthly comment on current affairs, similar to that of the *Miscellany*, but now styled 'Political-Religious Intelligence'. The victory at Trafalgar afforded the opportunity of making political capital out of the heightened sense of national unity.

May the inhabitants of this favoured island ever display the same unanimity, whether in defence of their liberties against a venal Parliament, an insidious minister, or an encroaching prince, or in opposition to an invading foe. (22)

In April 1807 Gogmagog expatiated on Lord Nelson's piety, which was support of the colonial system, and in December he attacked Cobbett's criticism of the Bible as 'cant of vulgar infidelity', comparing him unfavourably with Paine.

Paine's design was manly; there was indeed a generosity in it; it was associated (falsely or not it does not matter) with the idea of Liberty; it was the opposite less of Christianity than of popery; it was a disavowal of the right of priests to hookwink and tyrannise over mankind. The deism of Tories is pitiful and base. (23)

As well as these general statements of radical political principles, the *Repository* took a stand on specific social issues, commending ex-LCS secretary Bone's *Wants of the People* over Samuel Whitbread's Poor Bill which would strengthen the Established Church, and in education, preferring the Lancastrian plan to Colquhoun's. Colquhoun's *New and Appropriate System of Education for Labouring People* was excoriated as aiming to 'prevent the children of the poor from being educated in a manner to elevate their minds above the rank they are destined to fulfil in society'.

Is it not enough for the small minority which constitutes the great men of the earth, that they have reduced the majority of the human species to constant servitude, but they must degrade mankind to the state of mere machines? (24)

From 1808-1818 the Politico-Religious Intelligence attained a new sophistication as Monthly Retrospect in the able hands of William Frend. Frend (1757-1841) was a Fellow and tutor of Jesus, Cambridge, when the French Revolution filled him with a resolve to repair social wrongs. Congratulating the French government on 'the most glorious and grandest and I hope happiest event in human things' he joined the Society of Friends to Religious Liberty and the Cambridge Constitutional Society, and distributed radical ideas and literature throughout the country. In 1793 'the perusal of various popular writings and the conversation of those around me' led him to reflect on the state of the nation, and the result was his notorious tract, *Peace and Union recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans*. (25)

*Peace and Union* proposed triennial parliaments, to include copyholders in the suffrage, payment for members, and equal electoral districts; education for political responsibility for the lower classes. On penal reform it called for the abolition of the game laws and the amendment of the poor laws, partly on utilitarian grounds that the poor were 'the instruments of the ease, comfort and luxury of the rich', and partly on the natural law principle of a sufficient wage. On a similar basis it asked for law reform, disestablishment of the church, and abolition of tithes, and appealed to the government not to lose this opportunity of redressing grievances to prevent increasing discontent. (26) The furore over the tract was occasioned almost entirely by its Appendix, which

contained an impassioned diatribe against the war and its effects on the poor, and argued it was none of our business if all the crowned heads of Europe were taken off.

Frend was banished from Cambridge and came to London. In 1794 he joined the LCS and so began a long friendship with Place. In 1795 he published *The Scarcity of Bread, a Plan for reducing the High Price of this Article* which insisted the poor be subsidised by Parliament or the rich, and urged the lowering of the price of necessities. Place found him one of the most active in the LCS, and it was Frend in 1798 who raised subscriptions for the prisoners and their families. (27) In 1801 Frend continued his attack on the government's economic policy with *The Cause and Remedies of the Late and Present Scarcity and the High Price of Provisions* which blamed the poor summer, middlemen, currency depreciation, high war consumption, extensive loans and increased taxes. Agriculture was not keeping pace with manufacturing.

The invasion scare of 1804 forced Frend temporarily to abandon his anti-war stance to write *Patriotism, or the Love of our Country* to appeal for volunteers for the militia. But the basis of his argument was that patriotism depended on social justice and popular government. It could only be preserved by equality of law between upper and lower classes; equal administration of justice; and founding it in the lower classes, connecting them to the state by frequent parliaments. 'Annual would perhaps be the best', and the number of voters must be enlarged

'till by degrees it contained the whole of the nation at a certain age'. Where the people have a share in government 'they are active, industrious, full of resources, and ...(usually) invincible'. Where they are not,

a dull inert mass vegetates on the soil; the being is born and dies incapable of exercising the best energies of the mind, and the best feelings of his heart. (28)

So Frend brought to the *Repository* a profound commitment to radical ideals, and wide experience of campaigning. He was close friend to many leading radicals including Place, Burdett, Coleridge, Lamb, George Dyer, Bowring, Crabb Robinson and Blake. His tracts had gained him a reputation of economic reformer, and he had recently published a pamphlet on the *Present State of Banking*. Frend's association with the Parliament Court society brought it into the forefront of middle class radical politics.

One of Frend's main activities in 1807 had been to promote Paull and Burdett as independent candidates for Westminster in the election. The elections of 1806 and 1807 in Westminster represented, in Cobbett's opinion, 'the first serious attempts at democratic electoral organisation', dependent not upon wealth and corruption, but upon the voluntary efforts of artisans and shopkeepers. Frend was part of the committee composed of old LCS members, (Place, Richter, Langley, Buller, Currier, Lemaitre, Powell, Ridley, etc) and local tradesmen, who met

after the duel between Paull and Burdett to raise £50 to get Burdett elected.(29) One of Friend's first duties on the *Repository* was to write an obituary for the unfortunate Paull, and his magisterial account nicely reflects the spirit of radical Westminster.

Mr Paull's talents were moderate; his person and speech mean and uninteresting; never was man less fitted by nature to be a popular leader. Resentment and ambition were the ruling passions in his bosom. He chanced, however, to have a good cause, and this ensured to him for some time, the favour of the people.

Burdett, on the other hand was

returned in a triumphant manner, and according to the old independent usage, at the sole expense of the electors. (30)

Another leading Westminster radical much involved in these elections was the Unitarian ironmonger William Sturch, a member of the Essex Street church in the Strand, and regular contributor to the *Monthly Repository*. Sturch (?1753-1838) was the son of a General Baptist minister who dedicated himself to the cause of reform and social improvement. Resigning from the LCS in 1793, he rejoined in 1796, and remained for twenty-five years in the van of radical activity.(31) His *Apeleutherus, or an Effort to Attain Intellectual Freedom* (1799) presented a cogent statement of the beliefs of rational religionists.

Extolling FREE ENQUIRY he adopted the fashionable distinction between selfish and benevolent classes, the latter dedicated to the welfare of

the species, conferring benefits and diffusing enjoyment. Sturch associated the established Church with non-political Dissenters as enemies of true liberty:

those of the favoured faction, by their domineering temper, and those of the oppressed or tolerated sects by their abject or cringing sensibility, having eminently contributed to depress the spirit of freedom, and to check the progress of human intellect.

*Apeleutherus* affirmed the Universalist's confident expectation of human progress towards a more perfect society, through education, information, and the printed word.

It is this potent engine, (printing) which is destined to move the world; to communicate the arts of life and the discoveries of science to all mankind; to establish the universal empire of reason; to change the aspect of human affairs; to convert the earth into paradise. The powers that be have indeed taken alarm at its effects; and in more than one country of Europe, violent efforts are even now making to annihilate its existence, or to confine its operation. But no combination of partial interests will be able to arrest its wonder-making progress, or to extinguish that light which it has already diffused over the earth. (32)

In Part II of the book, Sturch stated a moral and social philosophy that is plainly Utilitarian.



The great end of all our pursuits and attachments ought undoubtedly to be the INCREASE OF HAPPINESS, by the diffusion of knowledge, the gradual improvement of moral discipline, and the consequent subjugation of the affections and passions of human nature to the legitimate empire of reason. (33)

It was a philosophy which he shared with the Parliament Court society. It took him and Friend in January 1809 onto the first committee of the Friends of Parliamentary Reform, and that for the Advertising on the Cause of Parliamentary Reform. They organised a meeting of Westminster electors in March to draw up resolutions, and a reform dinner at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in May of that year.

This activity naturally received full coverage in the *Repository*, which brought its readers monthly intelligence of radical Westminster. The April issue reported Burdett's enquiry into corrupt practices, and in May there was a lengthy account of reform agitation and the strength of popular opinion. June brought approving comments on Burdett's speech on Curwen's bill for reform, condemning the 'evils of the present borough mongering system and the tyranny it exercised over King and people'. The August edition reported the meetings of the Middlesex and Common Council of London to urge reform, with their 'very great body of freeholders', and the December comment supported the City of London censure of the ministers. Waithman in particular was commended for the 'new vigour' in common hall and council, and for his own independence and integrity. (34)

On both sides there is evidence of some attempt to formulate a constructive social policy. Waithman advocated the enclosure of commons for smallholdings for the poor, and legislation to limit working hours for children, and the sweated trades. (36) The Unitarian Universalists had already advanced their position on education, and in 1807 Richard Wright published his *Letters on Capital Punishment* which argued that it was 'unnecessary, useless and inglorious', and that we had no authority from the law of nature or Christian revelation to put to death. The basis of his argument was abstract principles of social justice, but Wright certainly had some understanding of the problems of the poor from his missionary journeys. As early as 1796 he had instituted a Wisbech Female Friendly Society which gave liberal relief for child birth and illness, maternity allowances, and death grants.(37) The campaign to abolish capital punishment was soon to gather momentum under Shelley, the Quaker William Allen, and Robert Owen, who attracted many Universalists to the cooperative movement.

In the following years up to the end of the war, the *Monthly Repository* combined its energetic advocacy of reform, with report and comment on current concerns. It criticised the conduct of the war, and the Duke of York affair, the national debt and state of the currency. The imprisonment of Burdett and Gale Jones in 1810 was of course deplored, and there was an enthusiastic account of Burdett's release which had been organised by Sturch. It was Frend who went to fetch him in the boat. (38) Sturch chaired the February Westminster reform meeting, and

spoke at the May annual Triumph dinner. (39) Even in 1811 and 1812 when the radical cause met with little success in Parliament (40), the *Repository* continued to report reform meetings and Burdett's fiery speeches, promoting the petition against the war and the Catholic Bill, and loyally defending the Universalist Daniel Eaton against his prosecution and sentence. (41) In 1813 it advocated mercy for the 'deluded men', the Luddites, supported the peace petition, the Princess of Wales, and the movement to improve affairs in the West Indies. (42)

The peace terms brought a renewed polemic against war, and concern over reinstatement of despotism instead of the hoped-for liberty. The Corn Bill inspired a firm stance on de-restriction, on the grounds that

the real interest of no one class in the community is to be sacrificed to the emolument of another.

The Unitarians joined in the address of Dissenting Ministers to the Prince Regent, urging the government to ban slavery and protect Protestants. Frend also noted the debate on freedom of the press in France and urged it in England: 'with us there is great room for improvement'. (43)

While Frend promoted radical policies in the *Repository*, Sturch played a leading part in organising committees, public meetings, and pressure groups. He joined the West London Lancasterian Association Committee, which was formed to promote cheap popular education, and was its chairman by 1814. (44) The campaign for popular education brought the

Parliament Court society closer to James Mill and the philosophical radicals. Aspland was already dining with Ricardo in 1810. (45) From 1811-2 Aspland was active in the Committee for the Protection of Religious Liberty to help repeal the Test Acts, and in 1813, with the help of Vidler and the Unitarian MP William Smith, he gained the repeal of the laws against Unitarians, the Trinity Bill. (46) In 1816, the society joined Burdett and Cobbett in blaming the misgovernment of the oligarchy for the popular distress. (47) Weekday evening lectures were set up at the Worship Street chapel with radical speakers like Vidler, Flower and Wright. The attendance was good, and sometimes very large. (48)

Vidler's participation in the lectures was short-lived, however, for in November 1816 he died. According to his friend Thomas Teulon, his health had been failing for some years, his asthma aggravated by a post-chaise accident and excessive corpulence. (49) He had succeeded in maintaining the Parliament Court society through two major secessions, and another separation in 1808. (50) The Minutes of the society show a remarkable continuity of membership, augmented by new names coming forward to the committee every year. The Declaration of the Trustees of 1825 for the South Place chapel gives a precise indication of the occupations of these committee members. They were ironmonger (2), grocer, oil merchant, flour factor, woollen draper, draper (2), druggist, tobacconist, printer, merchant (2), surgeon, doctor of medicine (Southwood Smith), and gentleman. Vidler's Unitarian Fund was thriving,

and well supported by Unitarian radicals. The chairman in 1813 was Goodbehere, Waithman's colleague on the common council. (51) Richard Wright was covering thirty to forty miles a day on his missionary tours, and claiming converts among the poor. (52) Under Vidler's leadership the Unitarian Universalists had amply fulfilled their ideal of working towards a more perfect society. They were now prominent middle class philosophic radicals.

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1. MR Watts, *The Dissenters* (1978), pp 487-8.
2. New Series iv (August 1805) pp 71-2. There is a discussion of Isaiah's prophecies, Old Series ix (July 1803) pp 177-84, but only on topographical detail and accuracy of translation.
3. ix (July 1803) pp 7-21.
4. Watts p 478.
5. D. Baumgardt, *Bentham and the Ethics of Today* (1966) pp 28-59, 522-543. E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels* (1974) pp 21-2. E.Hobsbawm, eg. *Age of Revolution* (1962) argues that the ideology of working class and socialist movements in the 19th century was secularist from the start, but the Universalists' motivation here was entirely Christian.
6. S. Mews, 'Reason and Emotion in Working Class Religion 1794-1824' in *Schism, Heresy and Protest, Studies in Church History* ed. Baker v 9 (1972) pp 368-9.
7. Aspland, *Memoir of Life, Works and Correspondence* (1850) p 125

8. *Memoir* pp 2-85
9. *Divine Judgements on Guilty Nations* (1804) pp 18-24. J.A. Hone, *For the Cause of Truth* (1982) pp 130-9.
10. i p 164. R. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress* (1938) p 120. Hone p139.
11. see S. Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief* (1977) p 280.
12. pp 6-32.
13. E.P. Thompson, *Making* (1974 ed.) pp 497-8.
14. *Memoir* pp 192-4,6. Eaton published *Plain Thoughts on the New Testament doctrine of the Atonement* (1802) announcing his universalism.
15. *Memoir* p 143. Flower declined to publish it.
16. p 272. Many booksellers refused it because it was too radical, F.E. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent* (1944) p 167.
17. *ibid* p 103
18. ii p 383.

19. J. Seed, 'Jeremiah Joyce, Unitarianism and the Radical Intelligentsia', in *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* xvii no.3 (April 1981) pp 90-100.

20. i p 126.

20. i p 196. R. Holt, *The Unitarian Universalist*, pp 196-197.

21. i pp 662-6.

22. i p 135.

23. ii pp 201, 614.

24. ii p 387. Bone was very religious according to Place, Add. Mss. 27,808, f 115, so may well have been associated with the Universalists.

25. F. Knight, *University Rebel, Life of William Frend* (1971) pp 84-120.

26. pp 12-44.

27. Add.Mss. 27,808 ff 63,97, 103. With their increasing intimacy Frend taught Place maths, astronomy and algebra.

28. pp 144-159.



29. Add.Mss. 27,850 f 66. *Making* ch.13. Hone p 158. G. Spater, *William Cobbett, Poor Man's Guardian* (1982) p 188.
30. iii p 280.
31. Hone p 24.
32. 1819 ed. pp iv, 38-9, 54.
33. p 112.
34. iv pp 231, 297-8, 349, 472, 701.
35. *Making* pp 509-10. J.R. Dinwiddy, 'The Patriotic Linen Draper', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* xlv (1973) pp 75-92.
36. Dinwiddy, p 92.
37. p 78. *Monthly Magazine* (1798) v p 83.
38. Add. Mss. 27,850 ff 229-37. Hone, pp 189-91. Knight, pp 252-4. *Monthly Repository* v pp 269-70, 314, 374, 420.
39. Hone, pp 189, 196.

40. *ibid* p 204.

41. vi pp 186, 308-15. vii pp 277, 340, 405, 593, 659, 721.

42. viii pp 80, 210, 486.

43. x pp 64, 447-8, 517.

44. Add. Mss. 35,152 f 69.

45. *Memoir* p 251. W. Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals* (1979) p 10, points out that the Benthamites were not uniformly bourgeois, and that Bentham himself was an extreme democrat with no class position. The Unitarian Universalist leaders were all of artisan origin, although increasingly identified with the wealthier tradesmen.

46. *Memoir* p 270.

47. Hone p 261. *MR* xi p 691.

48. xi pp 491-2.

49. xiii pp 4-7.

50. Minutes, Nov. 1808 f 15, letter from Charles Bass of Walthamstow, referred to a vote of censure on Vidler on which he left with most of the officers, leaving all in disorder. Bass asked, and was granted, leave to use the chapel on Sunday afternoons. An account by Teulon of the 'Philadelphian society' in Minutes 1818 f 150, claims that it broke up in October 1808. However, a Bass appears on the committee of 1816. Minutes and Deed of Trustees, Conway Hall.

51. xiii pp 773-4.

52. One convert, James Lyons, Baptist minister of Hull, was so inspired by Wright's politics that he campaigned with Eaton in the Chester elections. *Memoir* pp 285-90, not clear as to date - 1809-24?

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS UNDER FOX

The predominantly radical outlook of the Parliament Court society was evident in its choice of successor to Vidler. That choice was William Fox, a self-educated bank clerk trained as an Independent minister, and turned Unitarian in the school of Priestley and Belsham. He was already renowned for his opposition to the monarchy and the House of Lords. (1) Fox (1736-1864) had worked with his father as a weaver for two or three years, up to the age of fourteen, and is said to have helped organise the Norwich weavers into a branch of the LCS. (2) It seems however that his preoccupations at the time were with his own social advancement. He saw the opportunity to become a bank clerk as a 'step on the social ladder', moulding mind, manners and character, and enabling him to buy books and read Locke and mathematics'. (3)

Looking back at this early radical apprenticeship from the perspective of old age, Fox claimed that it served to mould his political inclination away from Jacobinism. He described the 'canonisation' of the weavers' leader, his first friend William Saint, as he was drawn in triumph through the town on his return from

London, saved from prosecution by the acquittal of Hardy, Tooke and Thelwall.

Yet there were sophistries in the faith of Jacobinism which the logical mind of the future mathematician was keen enough to detect and the perception of which subjected his character to the conflicting influences of political scepticism. (3)

In 1817, aged thirty, Fox was firmly committed to the rational reformist philosophy of the middle class radicals; involved in the Lancasterian movement, opposition to the Corn Law, and the campaign for religious toleration. His personal creed, as articulated some fifteen years later, integrated universalism with a sublimated utilitarianism. It comprised three principles. First was the principle of Christian morality which was 'utility in its best and purest , its broadest and highest sense'. This was inculcated by Christ when he commanded us to love one another and to do as we would be done by. Next was the education of the human race, and again Christ was the most efficient instructor. And above all there was the glorious doctrine of man's futurity, with the promise of earth's improvement, individual revival, and universal restoration. (4)

Fox's beliefs accorded well with the Universalists' idealism and moral enthusiasm, their crusade for moral regeneration, free enquiry, and universal education. The Parliament Court society considered him eminently qualified to 'promote the great cause of truth and righteousness'. (5) But something of that Jacobin apprenticeship remained in Fox's political outlook, a levelling tendency which found

little sympathy amongst the more conservative members of his congregation. He insisted on being introduced to his new flock as a preaching brother, not as a minister. (6) Under Fox the Unitarian Universalists moved steadily to the left of the 'bourgeois- Radical spectrum'. (7)

This change in direction was not immediately apparent. The good harvest of 1817 brought a relaxation of the post-war tension, and the abolition of income tax in 1816 removed a major tradesman grievance. There was very little political agitation in 1818, apart from some serious strikes provoked by the state of trade. The *Monthly Repository* continued its criticism of the government, defining the House of Commons as the power of the Crown, people and oligarchy, in the curious proportions 30:40:110. There was a sharp indictment of the Suspension of Habeas Corpus Act, which had just expired, and an attack on the game laws with their savage penalties.

Penal reform was very much Wright's province, and the article repeated many of his arguments from *Letters on Capital Punishments* of 1807, published under the name of Beccaria Anglicus: questioning the propriety of a law 'made to preserve for one class of the community the exclusive right to certain animals'. Acknowledgement was made to Bentham with an extract from his *Principles of Morals and Legislation* on penal laws, but the philosophical basis of Wright's argument was significantly different. His position was founded in a notion of social justice, whilst that of Bentham and Romilly was based on the

consequentialist principle that it was the certainty, rather than the severity of punishment that made it efficacious.

The Universalists advocated Utilitarian policies on a moral basis of Christian brotherhood and equality. Wright claimed that capital punishment had no authority from either the laws of nature or revelation, citing evidence from the gospels. Christ had abolished capital punishment when he rejected the Mosaic formula of an eye for an eye; he exhorted us to love our enemies. (8) Wright's contributions to the *Repository* were becoming more infrequent, however, as his missionary journeys took him away from London most of the time. It was Fox who now dominated the journal.

In 1818 Fox took over the political column from Frend, and it increasingly reflected his more radical stance. Frend became less involved in politics after the Spa Fields affair. He removed in 1820 to Stoke Newington to concentrate on workers' education, organising the Mechanics Institute in Bloomsbury with Birkbeck. But as late as 1830 he was working on a system of decimal coinage, and organising a cooperative store in Hastings; in 1832, aged 74, he addressed a Reform meeting. (9)

The Unitarian Universalists' involvement in Westminster politics was very much on the side of the moderates in the deep divisions that were now developing amongst London radicals. In the 1818 election Sturch was again active on the Westminster committee, but the committee was becoming increasingly distanced from the tavern world,

and the new generation of radical agitators, Hunt, Carlile, Sherwin and Dolby. In the 1819 by-election Sturch voted for George Lamb, the Whig, not the radical candidate JC Hobhouse. The Westminster committee supported Burdett in his campaign for a suffrage based on those who paid direct taxes, and the Unitarian Universalists had always argued that the working classes be educated to political responsibility. (10)

But outside Westminster the Parliament Court society became increasingly identified with advanced radical ideas. Its role in the reform movement had always centred on public debate of controversial issues in the *Repository* and through publications. The evening lectures on social problems instituted by Vidler continued to flourish. They focused on current radical preoccupations like Church and State, War, Philanthropy, Population, and Human Perfectibility. (11) Fox's 1818 lectures were published in the following year as *Subjects Connected with the Corruption, Revival and Future Influence of Genuine Christianity*. Their popularity seems to have resolved the society's misgivings over the radicalism of their new minister. In March 1819 the committee declared itself

fully impressed with the truth of the proposition that it is to controversy conducted on Christian principles we must look as the chief means of realising the reformation of Christianity which must precede any great improvement in the state of the world.

It raised his salary to £250. (12)



At the same time, Aspland's Non-Con Club, founded in 1817 to 'promote the great principles of Truth and Liberty' was becoming a centre for radical intellectuals, and an extra-parliamentary pressure group with important contacts within the House of Commons. (13) As well as the more obvious Non-Con programme of civil rights for dissenters, the Club discussed dangerously Jacobin proposals like Richard Taylor's paper, 'Inquiry into Private Property' which argued that the spirit of Christianity was directly opposed to the acquirement of personal riches, a system of private property. The *Repository* of 1821 displayed a similar socialist vein with an article on the community of goods in the primitive church. (14) As radical activity intensified in the post-war years, the Parliament Court leaders developed the political dimension of Universalism to reflect contemporary political ideas.

By 1819 Fox had assumed the leadership of the Unitarian reformers. He had soon acquired a reputation for eloquence and powers of oratory, compared by Carlyle to opening a window through London far into the blue sky. (15) The society's chief concern that year was with defending Carlile in his prosecution for selling the *Age of Reason*. The *Repository* made an impassioned defence of freedom of the press, which was developed by Fox in *Duties of Christians Towards Deists* into an affirmation of civil rights.

He accused orthodox religionists of suppressing free speech and the use of reason. Deists, he argued, had done service to the cause of human improvement. Their prosecution was a 'breach of the great

principles of impartial justice and equal rights which are the foundation of civil society', an 'invasion of the social contract', an 'usurpation of power by the majority over a minority, only to be vindicated by the assumption that power is right'. (16) Equality and social justice were Universalist principles, but the emphasis here is on the ethical and political aspects of these ideals, not the Christian. It was a trend that was to intensify in coming years.

There is no evidence to connect the Parliament Court society with the agitation by City radicals following Peterloo, in which their erstwhile coreligionists, the Freethinking Christians, played a prominent role. But in 1820 the affair of the Queen's divorce temporarily united all shades of radicals in opposition to King and government, initiating and orchestrating an unprecedented public uproar. Fox attended the Middlesex freeholders meeting in December, and the spy John Shegog singled him out as one of the leading activists.

The leading characters who delude the uninformed and seduce the lower orders into disaffection and political division and discontent are Unitarians, Deists and Freethinkers. Messrs Thompson, Coats, Fearon, Stevens and Mason are publick speakers at the Freethinking Chapel in Jewin Street, and Messrs Fox, Aspland, and Fellows are Unitarian Preachers and those are the most active agents under Alderman Wood, Mr Hume, Sir Robert Wilson, Barber, Beaumont, Sir Gerard Noel, Doctor Par, Rice, Mr Fellowes. (17)

Fox had brought the bourgeois radical wing of the Parliament Court Universalists into the same political position as their Spencean socialist colleagues.

The heady experience of preaching to huge crowds seems to have induced in Fox an image of himself as tribune of the people. His funeral sermon for Queen Caroline of August 1821 gave qualified approval to the institution of monarchy, in so far as it was the form of government 'most adapted to provide for the security, the prosperity, the freedom, the morals of the people'. The logic of supporting the Queen inhibited wholesale condemnation of that institution. But unfortunately there were 'dreadful obstacles in the moral path of the high-born, which it must require extraordinary strength of mind, or extraordinary grace from heaven to enable them to overleap'.

The people, on the other hand, were rarely wrong, never deliberately cruel or unjust. In the last few months, multitudes had assembled without outrage, fired by sympathy for the innocent and oppressed, honourable, disinterested and generous. 'The people alone can pour forth such a swelling tide of noble feeling'. (18) It was an argument for popular sovereignty based on the moral superiority of the people, appealing to the current revulsion at the personality and behaviour of the King. Fox's congregation shared his outrage at the treatment of the Queen, and wanted the pulpit draped in black. Aspland wrote to his wife that 'no man ought to speak of the event in language less than treason'. (19)

Fox's democratic sympathies and anti-aristocratic bias found a suitable vehicle in the radical *Westminster Review* which started publication in January 1824, edited by John Bowring (1792-1872), a member of the Parliament Court society. Fox provided the first leading article, an eloquent endorsement of the sovereignty of the people, thinly disguised as a review of James Shergold Boone's poem, *Man and Things in 1823*. There are obvious affinities with the views of Bentham, who financed the journal, and James Mill who contributed a formidable attack on Whig party and policy to the same edition, but there is also a commitment to Owen and cooperation. It was this emphasis on material improvement, as well as their egalitarian sense of human brotherhood, that distinguished the Universalist reformers from more conservative liberals like the Clapham sect. The Evangelicals campaigned for many progressive measures like penal reform and factory regulation, but their primary aim was 'reformation of manners', and they remained essentially paternalistic and remote from the people. (20)

The prosperity of the early twenties, with the liberalisation of trade, and Peel's pragmatic administrative reforms, had taken the urgency out of the reform movement, but Fox wrote as though an extension of the franchise was both inevitable and imminent. 'It could not be expected that political power should remain the exclusive and undisputed possession of the few, after the many had once begun to feel, and make felt, their importance'. Once again the argument used is a moral one. Fox saw the world as dividing into two classes, the oppressors and the oppressed, the combined power of

rulers marshalled against the combined intelligence of subjects. But education had wrought a great improvement in the intellectual importance of the working classes. 'No sooner were the poor taught to read, than somehow or other, they took to reading Cobbett', who was justified in his boast of 'the great enlightened people of England'. The intelligence thus created must ere long obtain an extension of the franchise. Meanwhile, social arrangements would be modified under Owen's cooperative principle. 'We live under a new dynasty in literature; the sovereignty of the people has succeeded to the oligarchy of learning....All our poets write for the people'. Fox ended with a lecture to Canning on the state of the parties, the conflicts of principle, recommending the government to take the cause of freedom out of the hands of political enthusiasts, hare-brained speculators, soldiers of fortune, ambitious rebels, hungry, desperate, unprincipled adventurers, and put it in the hands of the people. (21)

Fox's egalitarian humanism was balanced in the Parliament Court society by the equally radical but more explicitly religious view of Richard Wright. Where Fox argued for social and political reform on ethical grounds, Wright made it the logical corollary of his Christian faith. His *Christianity Consistent with the Love of Liberty and the Assertion of Civil Rights* of 1825 asserted that Christianity in itself was calculated to promote and secure the civil rights and liberties of the Human Race, and that it was the duty of Christians to diffuse equitable, liberal and benevolent principles. These would lead

those who are imbued with its genuine spirit, from a regard for justice and the good of their fellow creatures, by firm and peaceable, zealous and lawful means, to do all in their power especially by communicating right views and principles, to effect the reformation of civil and political corruptions and abuses, to promote the improvement of human laws and institutions, and the righteous administration of human affairs.

Christianity demanded democratic participation in civil affairs, and was essentially inconsistent with aristocratic principles. God made of one blood all nations in one equal brotherhood. 'The gospel levels all the proud distinctions which wealth, or power, or ambition..have erected', which have led to the 'haughty few' claiming 'exclusive rights and privileges'. Man had true dignity, as a rational moral being, made for immortality, to follow the dictates of reason, and 'act out the part of a free-born son of God'. (22)

It was of course the *Monthly Repository* which spelled out the practical details of the Universalist reform programme. Education was the major agent of human improvement, and sexual equality was an inevitable corollary of their vision of human dignity. There had already been a favourable review of John Morell's *Reason for the Classical Education of both sexes* of 1815. In 1823 the *Repository* published Harriet Martineau's plea for women's education to include

history, natural philosophy, and languages, to enable a woman to 'claim her privileges as an intellectual being'. (23) Aspland was prominent in the opposition to Brougham's Education Bill of 1820-1, when the Dissenting pressure groups were partly responsible for his dropping it, and he and his associates were active in establishing the non-sectarian London University. (24) Aspland drew up resolutions for penal reform, and the 1821 *Repository* urged that it be inspired by prevention, not revenge, that there should be differentiation between crimes, and that capital offences were unreasonable - all good Benthamite principles. (25) But there was no slavish discipleship of Bentham. In 1817 an attack on Malthus by Thomas Noon Talfourd had been published. (26) Owenite ideas were promoted in 1817, 1821, and 1823. (27)

In 1826 Sturch presented an analysis of Irish grievances, their cause and remedies, from his first hand knowledge of the country gained in his capacity as senior official of the Fishmongers Company, with considerable estates in Ulster. His remedies were to let the land in small holdings, to provide Catholic emancipation and universal non-sectarian education for the poor, in English, and to consolidate the executive with that in England, reforming the revenue laws, revising the system of internal government, removing oppressions and establishing freedom of trade between the two countries. (28) It was a prescription grounded in Utilitarian liberalism, but at the same time derived from Universalist ideals of human improvement.

By the 1820s then, the Universalist Unitarians were not simply responsive to fashionable radical ideas. They were actually initiating them, identifying problems, suggesting solutions, helping to form the main strands of radical opinion of the 1830s and 1840s. And the inspiration for those ideas was their rational Christianity, their emotional impetus their belief in the necessity of universal salvation in this world and the next. The move in 1824 to a newly built church in South Place, Finsbury, made the Parliament Court society the centre of liberal religion and intellectual activity. It was now a carriage congregation who paid one shilling entrance fee if it had no rented seat. The secret of its attraction for liberal intellectuals probably lay in just those qualities which appealed to John Stuart Mill; the combination of radical politics and intense cultivation of feeling. (29)

Mill was introduced to Harriet Taylor by Fox, and as the Dissenters grew more radical, and the Radicals more earnest and evangelical, the two men grew ever closer. (30) Mill professed to have no belief in God, but he wrote in his *Autobiography* of a time approaching when all persons with any sense of moral good and evil would cease to identify the dogmas of the orthodox church with true Christianity. His father had been averse to religion as the enemy of morality, its creeds, ceremonies unconnected with human good. 'Think (he used to say) of a being who would make a Hell'; one who would create the human race with the intention of assigning the majority to horrible and everlasting torment. (31) The Universalists presented an ethical



Christianity for those who shared James Mill's revulsion at a God who makes Hell.

Certainly many of the leading Philosophical Radicals were attracted to the Universalist Unitarians. The Utilitarian connection was strengthened through John Bowring, friend and adviser to Bentham, who edited the *Westminster Review* and later became a radical MP and founder of the Anti-Corn Law League with Cobden. Peter Alfred Taylor, of the old Unitarian Courtauld family, (1819-1891), was a devoted member of the society. He was a warm advocate of the cause of national secular education and freedom of the press, opposed government extravagance and social inequalities, and became a radical MP and chief exponent of the Manchester school. Southwood Smith, (1788-1861) figures on the deeds as trustee of South Place. A Unitarian theologian and physician, he addressed a typical Universalist energy and imagination to the transformation of British administration, and with Chadwick was responsible for the practical amendments to the Evangelicals' Factory Act of 1833. Harriet Martineau was a leading exponent of the new political economy, as well as ideas on education and women's rights, and her *Illustrations of Political Economy* popularised a simplified form of the new economic orthodoxy for children and the working classes. (32)

The membership of the South Place society extended to notable reformists, freethinkers and literary figures outside the Benthamite circle. Mrs Frank Malleon, founder of the college for working women, was a member, Henry Slack, Saul, Whitehead, Macmorren, Holyoake and

the Freethinking City radical Asherst. (33) Thomas Noon Talfourd, judge and radical writer, regular contributor to the *Monthly Repository*, who defended Edward Moxon for his publication of Shelley's *Queen Mab*, connected the society to the literary circle of Lamb, Godwin, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Hazlitt, and Browning was a regular attender at South Place meetings. (34) Leigh Hunt, Thomas Campbell, Hazlitt, John Forster, and Crabbe Robinson were later members of the congregation. (35) At Fox's request, Robinson supplied nine articles on Goethe for the *Repository* between May 1832 and April 1833. Fox's reputation and charisma had transformed a society of City tradesmen into one dominated by upper middle class professionals. It was a group much interested in the new critical scholarship. HC Robson's pioneering studies on German thought were featured in the *Repository* of 1832-3, and the assistant minister, Philip Harwood, wrote on DF Strauss' *Der Leben Jesu* (1835) in 1841. (35) With the more intellectual composition came a heightened tendency towards secularism.

The social and intellectual standing of the South Place society gave an added impetus to its role in the constitutional revolution of the years 1828 to 1832. In 1827 the Non-Con Club initiated the drive for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and with the South Place society, campaigned vigorously for this and Catholic Emancipation. (36) The concession of 1828 meant that only entrenched political power, not metaphysical principles, could preserve the remaining disabilities of the Dissenters. It was a major concession of principle that fulfilled the society's first objectives. But it

only served to fuel its political energies. After striking a blow for freedom of speech by attacking the prosecution and imprisonment of Robert Taylor in 1827, the South Place radicals concentrated their whole attention on parliamentary reform. (37)

The movement for parliamentary reform developed only slowly at first. Even at the Rotunda it had to compete with other prescriptions for curing working class ills, like trade unionism, Owenite socialism, or Taylor's deism. When Aspland gave his Royal Mortality sermon on George IV's death in June, he was vague as to the means by which the people would achieve social improvement. Taking up Fox's theme of the 'strong temptations of princes to contravene the law of God', he reassured his audience that even only partially free and enlightened communities were swayed by public opinion: 'and under the influence of the spirit of modern times, a nation, unified in its sentiments, will not long wish and seek in vain for any social improvement'. (38) With the founding of the Birmingham Political Union and Brougham's election campaign in July, reform became the dominant political question. The July revolution in France found a warm response in British radicals, and Aspland was ecstatic. He wrote to his son in August, 'This French Revolution absorbs my whole mind and exhausts my joy. I am ready to say 'It is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes'. A nation has been born in a day'. (39)

The revolution made little impact on the General Election of 1830, but Aspland was active in his Cambridge constituency, organising the Liberal Committee in London, and succeeding in displacing Lord

Charles Manners by the independent Adeane. Manners he said was an 'inveterate enemy of freedom and never-failing supporter of Ministerial profligacy'. (40) In his sermon on the coronation of William and Adelaide, Aspland introduced reform as a Christian necessity to which the new monarchs must address themselves. He claimed that their servants had 'pledged themselves ..to..the reform of the frame of government..the healing of the discontents and the union of all classes of men in the enjoyment of common laws and equal rights; the lessening of public burdens'. (41)

Fox supported the reform movement in the *Repository* which he had edited since 1828, and bought in 1831. In November of that year, he attacked the Lords for thwarting the will of the nation; the bishops had 'sinned past political redemption'. (42) Fox was much involved in the subterranean political unions, the National Union of the Working Classes founded by Watson and Lovett, two of his congregation, the ex-Freethinking Christian Hetherington, Cleave and Carpenter, and the National Political Union founded by Erskine, Perry and Place, now closely associated with the Benthamites. (43) The secular campaign was clearly taking priority over his pastoral duties. In 1832 Fox addressed the people daily in Leicester Square, and Place told John Saunders that he was 'the bravest of us all', (44)

Fox too was greatly enthused by the French Revolution, and by the new Christianity, the religion of humanity, with its gospel of the amelioration of the poor: 'in this, and this alone, consists the divinity of the Christian religions'. (45) His sermon *The Claims of*

the *Poor on the Followers of Christ*, printed in the December *Repository* of 1831, pares down the essential Universalist commitment to human improvement to an emotional humanism. He contrasted the elegance and luxury of city life with the 'noisome smells, loathsome sights, and disgusting sounds' of the poor quarters, the hard and ceaseless toil, inadequate wage, disease, depravity, violence, intoxication and crime, their associations of 'barbarism, brutality anguish, confusion and guilt'. Poverty was not inevitable; the Christian must act. 'The arrangements of society may surely be so modified, as that, though comparative poverty may remain, yet its pestiferous atmosphere shall in a great degree be purified'. Significantly, of all the social philosophies preaching amelioration of the poor - 'Wallace's Prospects of Mankind, the Social Contract of Rousseau, the speculations of Godwin, the wild agrarianism of Spence, the paternal school of Pestalozzi, the prophecies of the Millenarians, the cooperative system of Owen'- Fox singled out as 'far above all in distinctness and rationality, the social anticipations of Saint-Simon'.

Fox's enthusiasm was evidently matched by that of his congregation, because John Fisher, a member of the South Place society, contributed three articles on the Saint-Simonians to the *Repository* in 1831, and Fox extolled their social gospel as the 'one great application of Christian principle of man's fraternity, even though their theology was 'a very crude affair'. He was at one with a vision of society in which every man was placed according to his capacity and rewarded according to his works; none privileged by birth. (46) The Saint-

Simonian blend of Romantic idealism and emotional philanthropy was obviously highly congenial to the Universalist vision of Christian brotherhood and social improvement. But the championship of the religion of humanity marked a further stage in the gradual secularisation of the South Place society.

Fox's consuming interest was now not religious but avowedly political, as pressure built up for the Reform Bill. 'Nowadays, it is chiefly in politics that we must do, or violate, our duty to our neighbour'. (47) His *On the Parliamentary Pledges of Candidates at Ensuing Elections* printed in the *Repository* of 1832 set out his specification for the new Radical member of the reformed Parliament, and the platform on which he should seek election. He must be of superior intellect and sound education, preferably self-taught; knowledgeable in history and statistics, and of the opinions and feelings of the people; independent and eloquent. To this catalogue of secular accomplishments was added an utilitarian programme of reform. The candidate must pledge himself to repeal the taxes on knowledge, ameliorate the civil and penal code, abolish all monopolies, especially the Corn Laws, and wasteful expenditure of public money, reform the Church, and make Parliament more accountable.

Of the twenty or so Radicals elected in 1832, most had some connection with the South Place society. George Grote the banker came from the inner circle round Bentham, and John Fielden was a convert of Richard Wright. (48) The Radicals were distinguished in the

reformed House of Commons by their demand for action on social problems and constitutional reform. Their campaign was vigorously supported by the *Monthly Repository*, now firmly identified with the Radical 'movement' party, and an organ for advanced social views. John Stuart Mill blamed the inadequacies of the Reform Act on a 'shopocracy' that had sacrificed the people. He urged that the working class be educated for universal suffrage. (49) Fox pointed to the anomaly of the exclusion of women, and advocated the secret ballot as the only guarantee of the independence of the poor man. (50) There were repeated demands for the repeal of 'taxes on knowledge' (51), and a system of national secular education was expounded by Harriet Martineau in 1832 and Mill in 1834. (52) Legal reform was urged by Fox in 1832, reduction of the armed forces and proscription of flogging by Adams and Mill in 1834. (53)

Inevitably the *Repository* took an Utilitarian line on the poor, stressing the moral degradation of pauperism. Fox's remedy was the classic liberal one of free enterprise. He argued that the solution lay in encouraging industry, abolishing the Corn Laws to give labourers cheaper food, eliminating taxes, removing the restrictions on the freedom of labour, establishing universal education, and extending political rights - to which he added the fashionable nostrum of systematic emigration. (54) Mill naturally supported the Poor Law of 1834, but his contributions to the journal between 1832 and 1835 represented a more radical democratic Benthamism, with attacks on the spirit of aristocracy and privilege, and a demand for

constitutional reform first, followed by universal education and a free press, with the possibility of a republic in the future. (55)

Women's rights were by now an integral part of the Radical platform, and they were energetically promoted in the 1833 *Repository* by 'Junius Redivivus', WB Adams, who married first Place's daughter and then Sarah, daughter of Benjamin Flower. His 'On the Condition of Women in England' protested that women under the English social and moral standards were slaves, and that marriage was simply legalised prostitution. Women must be regarded as the equals of men, given the same education, and recognised as moral equals. Marriage should be a civil contract and dissoluble. (56)

Divorce had become a very personal issue for Fox at this time, with his increasing affection for his ward, Eliza Flower. In 1834 he formally announced his public separation from his wife, and removed to Bayswater with Eliza, where he became friendly with the Novello family, Dickens, Carlyle, John Forster and the actor-manager Macready. The move brought the condemnation of respectable London, and the loss of some 43 out of 156 seatholders with a reduction in his stipend. (57) Fox was disowned by the other Unitarian ministers, but the majority of his society remained faithful to him, and the radical principles which he continued to advocate. The separation from the Christian reformers can only have served to accentuate the drift towards secularism.



After 1835 the society's main vehicle for radical ideas was a series of 26 discourses published in 1840 as the *Finsbury Lectures*. The *Repository* was never profitable, and in 1836 Fox sold it to RH Horne and Leigh Hunt, a member of the society, after which it declined for two years and then went out of publication. The lectures alternated secular subjects like the Corn Laws and national education with broadly religious or moral ones like 'Morality illustrated by various classes by which Society is divided'. All but two of the 'Morality' lectures were drafted by Place, who had already worked closely with Fox in promoting the Society for the Diffusion of Political and Moral Knowledge in January 1833. Place drafted a circular letter to be given away at meetings of Owen and Mechanics Institutes, the National Union of the Working Classes, and trades unions, and Fox and Roebuck revised it. (58)

The 'Morality of Poverty' lecture embodied Fox's favourite theme of the moral superiority of the people. Place was rather more familiar with the London poor than Fox, and he supplied evidence to discount the 'cant' of writers on the lower orders that they were improvident and dissolute. These were Moral People. In Place's own experience, hardworking workmen sacrificed their health to care for their families, and to help others. Poor women were exemplarily moral, giving services to one another unparalleled in any other class, nursing the sick with contagious diseases, and caring for orphans beyond their scanty resources. Place enclosed three letters from a Spitalfields weaver, Richard Grey, who maintained his independence and a decent suit on 7/6 a week. (59) It was an essentially emotional

Universalist approach to poverty that owed little to Utilitarian theory.

Fox also wrote copiously in the *True Sun* and *Morning Chronicle*, and edited *The Sunday Times*, whose circulation he raised from two thousand to fifteen thousand. In 1840 Cobden gave Fox the job of addressing the Anti-Corn Law League, and according to Bright he became its leading orator. (60) His arguments were the standard Utilitarian ones, but the inspiration was usually explicitly Christian and Universalist. He deplored the 'great evil in this country that moral and religious considerations are allowed to blend so little as they do with political and commercial discussions'. Abolition was our Christian duty, to improve the physical condition of the working classes, and enable education and moral improvement. The Corn Law was incompatible with community, since it was for the exclusive benefit of one class, widening distinctions which the Christian wanted to obliterate. However there were occasions when his vocabulary was of the secular Enlightenment. In his speech at Covent Garden in 1843 he claimed that Free Trade principles were the dictates of Nature, and that it was 'that Power' which had designed the world for the common good, thus making it 'no longer the patrimony of a class, but the heritage and paradise of humanity'. (61)

Between 1844 and 1846 Fox gave his popular lectures to the working class, pleading for the Chartist political programme, public education, free trade, and the principles of pacifism and self-

determination in international affairs. (62) In 1847 he was invited to stand for the working class constituency of Oldham, which he represented until 1862. His course of lectures to the South Place society on 'Religious Ideas' in 1849 clearly demonstrate the extent to which his religious beliefs had developed towards secular humanism. It was a 'Religion of Humanity' that he preached, belonging to human nature, white or black, from West or East, 'common as sense and reason, thought and feeling, mind and heart'. These great moral and religious ideas 'prove themselves by their very existence and nature', preparing humanity 'for a different world of existence, a spiritual world, unfolded to us by the inward sense'. By implication, Scripture, the word of God, was no longer necessary. These ideas 'live and reign in the mind; as I have said, they alone deserve the name of revelation'. (63)

Fox's main themes had always been the purposes of Nature, the principle of freedom, hopes of reason and progress, the solidarity of mankind, and the truth which underlies all religions. (64) He had shaped the identity of the South Place society to conform to those principles. One of his successors, Henry Barnett (1858-63), complained with heavy irony that he was thought too Evangelical for the society. He claimed to have been accused of preaching on Christ, not Socrates, of boring the congregation with the Bible instead of other books, of being too reverential and seeking to build churches, not to denounce and destroy them. (65)

Fox's political commitments made it impossible for him to continue his pastoral duties at South Place. The congregation had already found an assistant minister, and Fox addressed the society for the last time in 1852. Its members had continued to be active in radical politics. The Minute Book of the Metropolitan Reform Association of 1842 lists at least three: WH Asherst, PA Taylor and John Bowring, all then or later Radical MPs. (66) Under Moncure Conway (1864-85), the South Place Chapel became the foremost home of intellectual and middle-class freethought. Stanton Coit (1887-91) completed the transformation of the congregation into an Ethical Society. (67)

The key to this steady process of secularisation lies partly in the contemporary challenges to traditional Christian belief from scientific and philosophical thought. Many Victorian intellectuals were making the transition from faith through doubt to some form of agnosticism or humanism. But more profoundly was it inherent in the mystical humanism of the Universalist creed. With the moral questioning of the doctrine of hell came a growing emphasis on man and the dignity and importance conferred on him by the promise of immortality. And his earthly improvement took priority over the heavenly, which was more certain. Central to this development was the shift from a millennial philosophy to an Utilitarian one; from a conviction of fulfilling the will of God to a commitment to fulfilling the dignity of man, maximising human happiness in this world. In joining the Unitarians the Parliament Court society infused the rational reformers with a new emotional power and vitality. (68)

But under Fox these Universalists changed their Christian vision of social improvement for a humanist one.

#### REFERENCES

1. R. Garnett, *Life of WJ Fox* (1910) pp 37-40. Mss notes for autobiography, Conway Hall.
2. S.K. Ratcliffe, *The Story of South Place* (1955) p 8. S Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief* (1977) p 17. C.B. Jewson, *Jacobin City* (1975) p 39.
3. Mss notes. This of course was the view of the aged Fox, darling of upper-class liberals, who saw the position of bank clerk as hanging 'like Mahomet's coffin above the floor of vulgarity and below the roof of gentility'. He was introduced to Unitarianism at this time - 1799-1807 - by his maternal uncle, a grocer.
4. *Christian Morality* (1833) pp 16, 112.
5. Minutes of Parliament Court society, Nov. 1816, f 54.
6. Budd p 18.
7. B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983), p 276. E. Halevy, *Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (1928) pp 299-300.
8. XIII pp 150, 286, 342, 598. *Letters on Capital Punishment* (1807) pp 78-82. The Universalists' main concern that year was with supporting William Hone against the charges of blasphemy for his

political squibs and parodies. Aspland sat by his side in court, supplying suggestions, illustrations and books for his defence. *Memoir* p 336.

9. F. Knight, *University Rebel* (1971), pp 270-96.

10. J.A. Hone, *For the Cause of Truth* (1982), pp 280-293. W. Thomas, *The Philosophical Radicals* (1979), p 76, argues that Hobhouse lost the 1818 election for the radicals by endorsing universal suffrage. He also points out, p 86, that the radical interest was more successful in general than local elections. The politically influential classes went off to the country in general elections, but spent the by elections in London, so tradesmen were forced to be more deferential. It is sadly not possible to make any positive identification of Universalist voting in the 1818 Westminster poll book, since the names given in the Parliament Court minutes are usually just surnames. Goodman, Keens and Mills voting for Burdett only may have been those of that name on the committee. In the 1802 Poll Book, Theophilus Lindsey at Essex Street voted for Burdett, but again it is impossible to be sure about Bicknell, Dixon and Livermore. None of the Universalist leaders seem to have had voting rights in either poll. Certainly Aspland voted in Cambridge still, presumably having property there, in his home town, Wicken.

11. H Conway, *Centenary of S Place Society* (1894) p 56.

12. Minutes f 164. Vidler had been on £140 in 1814.

13. *Memoir* pp 403, 467 initiates Test and Corporation Acts, laboured for Catholic emancipation.

14. F.E. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent* (1944) pp 161-4.

15. Conway p 57.

16. (1819), pp 23, 34-40.

17. PRO HO 40 15/1 Dec. 18th.

18. *Funeral Sermon for Caroline, Queen of England* (Aug.19, 1821), pp 19-26.

19. *Memoir* p 423.

20. J.S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), pp 60-2. E. Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics* (1953. 1971 ed.), pp 116-137, notes that Hazlitt, (a South Place member), was a bitter critic of the Clapham sect - despite the collaboration between Anglican and Dissenting reformers over issues such as slavery.

21. *Westminster Review* I (Jan.1824), pp 3-16. Fox's exalted view of working people stood in sharp contrast to that of the liberal reformers, who still adopted a paternalist stance, and stressed the need of education for self-dependence. Even Mill saw that independence as the fruit of social progress, though he shared Fox's



belief that cooperatives would become the typical form of industry. See *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) Book IV, Ch. VII, para. 6. Compare too Place, Add. Mss. 27,809 f 52, 'It is to the middle class now, .. the salvation of all that ought to be dear to englishmen must be confided: it is among this class that the great improvement has been going on; it is from this class now informed as no class in any country at any time was more informed, that whatever of good may be obtained may proceed'.

22. pp 8-39. Wright was by now only loosely attached to the society - see *Missionary Life and Labours* (1824), pp 427-38. S.A. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism 1832-1847* (1987) p 34 quotes Fielden on Wright's preaching at Todmorden in 1818: 'Those views harmonise more as my ideas of what Christ himself taught than any other I have heard.' Fielden himself sought a religion to suit his political faith, and throughout his life subordinated religion to political priorities. *ibid* p 31.

23. X (1815) p 243, XIII (1818) p 407.

24. *Memoir* p 426.

25. XVI (1821) pp 8-11, also XIII (1818) p 407

26. XII pp 152-3, 471-4, 532-5, 600-5.

27. Mineka, pp 163-4.

28. XXI (Jan.) pp 412-3. Accounts vary as to whether Sturch was an iron or fishmonger.

29. Thomas p 187, Conway p 57.

30. M St J Packe, *Life of John Stuart Mill* (1954) p 127.

31. pp 32-3.

32. R.K. Webb, *Modern England* (1969) p 178.

33. Conway p 58, Ratcliffe pp 10-32. Other information on individuals, DNB.

34. Ratcliffe. HC Robinson (1799-1866) *Diary* (1872 ed.) does not mention this, but refers to attendance at Aspland's sermons in 1813, p 213, dinner at Bischoff's with the Indian Deist Rammohun Roy, friend of Fox, p 118, and his interest in the eternity of future punishment, p 119.

35. Register of members, Conway Hall. Budd, p 17, names William Lovett and James Watson as artisan members, but their names do not figure in the register. However, Lovett does figure as a subscriber to the Unitarian Fund, 1835, and his philosophy expressed in *Life and Struggles* (1876) p 37 is clearly Universalist. 'I had been led from my recent studies to look upon practical Christianity as inspiration

for the promotion of brotherly kindness and good deeds to one another'.

36. Aspland, *Memoir* p 467, Conway p 58, Mineka p 187.

37. Mineka p 220.

38. *Memoir* p 220.

39. *Memoir* p 511. See G. Spater *William Cobbett The Poor Man's Friend* (1982) p 493 for similar reactions.

40. N. Gash, 'English Reform and French Revolution in the General Election of 1830' in R.Pares and AJP Taylor ed. *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier* (1956) *Memoir* p 516

41. *Memoir* p 516.

42. V (1831) p 85.

43. Spater p 489.

44. Mineka pp 187-8. Ratcliffe says Lincolns Inn Fields.

45. V (1831) p 85.

46. *ibid* pp 83-8, 181-9, 194, 482. See too K. Taylor, *Political Ideas of Utopian Socialists* (1982) pp 1-89, and Fontana and Prati, *St Simonianism in London* (1833) pp 7-23. Fox started the Domestic Missions in 1830-1.
47. *ibid* p 194.
48. S. Mews, 'Reason and emotion in working class religion 1794-1824' in *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest, Studies in Church History*, ed. Baker, ix p 365.
49. VIII (1834) p 170.
50. VII (1833) p 81, IX (1835) pp 476-7. Fox tentatively advocated women's suffrage VI (1832) pp 637-42.
51. eg VI (1832) pp 401, 439-41; VIII (1834) pp 5,6.
52. VI (1832) pp 693-4; VIII (1834) pp 356-9, 441.
53. VI (1832) pp 440-1; VIII (1834) pp 241, 332-6, 599.
54. VII (1833) pp 371-4. The wider campaign for women's rights is described in B. Taylor, *op.cit.* pp 230-7.
55. Mineka p 283.

56. VII pp 164-77.

57. Ratcliffe, p 32.

58. Add.Mss. 35,154 ff 167, 173, 178.

59. 35,150 ff 86-7.

60. Ratcliffe p 33 and DNB.

61. *Moral View of the Corn Law Question* (1839) pp 2-5. G. Wallas, *Conway Memorial Lecture. William James Fox (1786-1864)* (1924) p 16.

62. Wallas p 27. Fox's continuing support of working class education is illustrated in a letter of his of 1854 to Curzon in Dr Williams Library. In it he expressed his anxiety for the intellectual progress of the working classes, but regretted that he was too ill to attend the Huddersfield's Mechanics Institute's Annual Soiree. The Chartist connection began at least as early as 1836, and probably when Fox joined the London Working Man's Association. See F.B. Smith *Radical Artisan William James Linton (1812-97)* (1973) pp 12-14. Lovett and Watson were members of the South Place society as well as Linton, and Lovett's writings clearly reflect Universalist humanist ideals. See eg *Address to Friends of Humanity* (1845) p 6 'the great principle of human brotherhood'; *Proposal for the Consideration of the Friends of Progress* (1847) proposing union in a 'spirit of Christian brotherhood'; *Chartism* (1840) p 11, the working class to be

a 'band of brothers...setting an example of propriety to their neighbours'.

63. *Memorial Edition* (1864-8) v.8 p 276.

64. Wallas p 16.

65. I.D. MacKillop, *British Ethical Societies* (1986) pp 48-9, Conway p 100.

66. Add. Mss. 27,810 ff 2, 39, 49, 231.

67. MacKillop p 50, E. Royle, *Religion and Unbelief* (1971) pp 82-3.

68. Carlyle had described the Unitarians in a letter to Mill as having a 'certain mechanical metallic deadness', quoted in Wallas p 21. Linton acknowledged the radicals' special debt to Fox, *James Watson, A Memoir* (1879) p 47. He was the 'virtual founder of that new school of English radicalism which looked beyond the established traditions of the French Revolution and escaped the narrowness of Utilitarianism'.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### UNIVERSALISTS AND THE SPENCEAN MILLENNIUM: THE FREETHINKING

#### CHRISTIANS

Belief in the Second Coming of Christ to bring the reformation and renewal of the world was an integral part of Universalist theology. It was this dynamic combination of chiliasm and universal salvation that gave rise to their vision of an urgent necessity of reforming society. Universalist theology had always interacted with secular political thought, absorbing Enlightenment ideals of justice, rationality, and material progress. With the main body of the Parliament Court society, those ideals had come to take precedence over spiritual regeneration, and the mystical creed of millennium was subordinated to the rational secular philosophy of utility and human happiness. But for the splinter group which broke away in 1798, the millennium remained the mainspring of a fundamentalist Christian faith derived from a literal and eclectic interpretation of the prophetic scriptures. Only conversion to true Christianity could bring about the perfect society to which man must inevitably progress. (1)

In December 1798, this small group of rebel Universalists, styled Humble Enquirers after Truth, met at a room in Old Change to determine the principles of true religion. After a year's debate, they published in 1800 *The True Design of the Church of God*. It was still an Universalist church, holding universal restoration after limited corrective punishment, and the 'beauty and simplicity of Christian doctrines in accordance with the principles of reason and nature'. (2) But there were no external rites or public worship, no preachers or teachers. A truly egalitarian society elected an Elder and seven deacons every three months, with the duty of advising and reproving, admonishing the brethren. (3)

Mutual watchfulness and exhortation enforced Christian obedience to the will of the majority, democratically expressed. It was contended that 'Christianity applies its restraining, directing and punitive laws to every concern and action of life'; that the talents of each were subservient to the interests of the whole, and the 'individual will accountable to and controllable by the authority and judgement of the body'. Members were expelled for disbelief in the truths of Christianity, immoral conduct not repented, or disobedience of the laws of Jesus and contempt of the one true Church of God. (4)

This choice of name for the new church was significant. Its central principle was that 'the free exercise of reason is essential to a true understanding and appreciation of divine truth' (5), and for this they were popularly known as the Freethinking Christians. But divine truth was determined during the year's debate from an eclectic



interpretation of scripture, and immediately hardened into dogma. The Church distinguished between true scripture, and interpolations or mistranslations. Only prophetic parts were divinely inspired; the rest were simply the record of God's dealings with mankind. (6) With some justification Henry Hetherington characterised the Freethinking Christian argument as: 'There are certain plain declarations in the scriptures which we believe to be true; all passages therefore which appear to contradict these declarations must be either mistranslations or apocryphal'. (7) There is corroboration of this in the *Freethinking Christian Magazine*, where St Paul's admonition to submit to secular authority is brushed aside as apocryphal. 'The problem of 13 Romans is solved by striking out the first seven verses, the eighth verse will follow the last of the preceding chapter in perfect order. Jesus taught no slavish love of authorities'. (8) The succeeding years saw a steady reinforcement of the conviction of being a peculiar people, uniquely endowed with religious truth, and an ever more violent intolerance of other shades of religious opinion or practice.

It was over authority in the Church that the Freethinking Christians separated from the Parliament Court society. Samuel Thompson, Deacon, and twenty-one others condemned the appointment of Abraham Bennett to replace Vidler during his absence on missionary tours as 'destructive of all freedom of choice'. (9) They denounced all paid preachers as priestcraft, holding that mutual teaching was the primitive apostolic practice. 'Equality...is the condition of members of the Church of God...All that system of spiritual domination, which has

exercised and still exercises so much influence in the Christian world, is wholly and avowedly without the authority of the apostles of Jesus; and though essential for the support and influence of a class, is utterly subversive of the rights of believers, and the constitution of the Church of God'. (10)

Hetherington, however, attributed their secession to Thompson's refusal to submit to any authority, and to his desire to dominate. 'The late celebrated Mr Vidler, who was remarkable for the depth of his penetration, and the strength of his judgement, took a similar view of Mr Thompson's character; for when contending with him on one occasion, he addressed him in these words, 'Samuel Thompson, there is imprinted on your forehead, I WILL BE KING''. (11) There can be little doubt that Thompson did dominate the Church of God from its inception. In 1806 he was brought back from retirement in the country for his children's education to deal with dissensions in the society, which 'invariably fixed upon some designing or weak man, and have soon got into such a state as to be compelled to say, 'Brother Thompson, you must be Elder or we cannot go on'. Thompson himself claimed that 'EVERY idea, EVERY opinion which you hold as valuable, and which distinguishes you from all professors, you owe to ME!'. (12)

A tradesman from a family of City tradesmen, Samuel Thompson (1766-1837) was educated at the Bluecoat School, and apprenticed to a watchmaker. He was evidently a handsome, sociable young man, who married young and lived above his income. He changed to the more

lucrative trade of publican, taking wine vaults at Smithfield, a notoriously low neighbourhood, but forbidding drunkenness, swearing and immoral conduct. Here he prospered, remarrying in 1793 a woman of some property, and became more serious.

In 1794 he was converted by Elhanan Winchester, and embarked on a programme of study, self-denial and visits to prisons. By 1795 he was Deacon of Parliament Court church, and his preaching drew such great crowds, from the 'force of his argument and the perspicuity of his reasoning' that in 1798 the magistrate interfered in the interests of public peace. (13) That year he debated his Unitarian position in the *Universalist Miscellany* and wrote the society's pamphlet aimed at working people, *An Address to Candid and Serious Men*. (14) Thompson's grandson, Sydney Dobell, claimed that his acquaintance with freethought, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau and Paine, had convinced him that only in the life and teaching of Christ lay the secret of human improvement. He accounted for his success in business by the energy and perseverance, shrewdness and high principles that he brought to all his endeavours, and maintained that he discarded all personal ambition and worldly aim in political life, the one end of reform to make men free to follow the truth. (15)

The Freethinking Christians modelled their church structure on the early Church, but they did not emulate apostolic poverty or community of goods. Mostly tradesmen, their rationalist, materialist creed saw no inconsistency between brotherhood and mutual support, and economic individualism. The Elder in September 1818, John Dillon, welcoming

the new church in Battle, exhorted them to live by the principle of equality of rich and poor in the sight of God. But he added, 'you are not called upon to sacrifice your connections, or destroy your prospects in the world, on the contrary, you have fresh motives under proper regulation to encourage you'. (16)

Most of the leading members of the Church were already successful and prosperous. Dobell described the composition of the Church as one or two country gentlemen of property, a few merchants, many tradesmen, and a few artisans or servants, to whom their faith imparted 'a gentle dignity of manner and accuracy of thought and expression to those otherwise common or vulgar in habits and conviction'. One gentleman was Dobell's father-in-law, George Fordham, of an influential Cambridgeshire family, lord of three manors, and with considerable property. He was a 'man of intellect and culture, an energetic social and political reformer...well acquainted with Godwin, Cobbett and other celebrities'. (17)

Another leading radical attracted to the society was the City solicitor, W.H. Ashurst, (1792-1855); Common Councilman and Under-Sheriff for London, and prominent supporter of rights for women, anti-slavery, European nationalism and republicanism, postal reform, poor relief, Chartism, and of course, religious freedom. He was patron and legal adviser to Owen, and founded the Owenite socialist journal *Spirit of the Age* edited by Holyoake from 1847-9. After the dissensions which divided the Freethinking Christians in 1834, Ashurst joined the other Universalists under Fox, and his principles

became progressively more secularist, a term he is credited with attributing to Thompson's group. These were 'to provide a system of ethics and morality independent of revealed religion, amenable to rational discussion, and progressively discoverable by scientific advance'. Ashurst is a notable example of the independent seeker after spiritual truth and social improvement for whom Universalism provided an opportunity to found political ideals on Christian principles. Secularism was for Ashurst the Universalist doctrine of human brotherhood. He helped found the secularist weekly *Reasoner* edited by Holyoake from 1846-61, and the radical weekly *The Leader* 1850-60. (18)

But the leadership of the true Church of God remained with Thompson and the original group of Universalists from Parliament Court. Elders were chosen from Thompson and his three sons-in-law, Henry Fearon, William Coates and John Dobell, all in the liquor trade, John Dillon, haberdasher, and Thomas Anthony Teulon, probably the latter in the Directories of 1795 and 1806. (19) Those most active politically were tradesmen: Henry Hetherington and Charles Mitcham, printers; John Savage, blindmaker and later publican, with his three brothers, James, Thomas and Charles, haberdashers; Benjamin Warden, saddler; and Thomas Potter, tallow chandler. George Cannon (1789-1864), solicitor and founder member of Cartwright's Union for Political Reform, had joined the society by 1812 to edit its journal, as had Dr William Hodgson, (1765-1851), who had spent two years in Newgate 1793-1795 for toasting the 'French Republic' and comparing the King to a 'German hog-butcher'.

Hodgson's *Commonwealth of Reason* of 1795 presented a freethinker's vision of a free, equal and fraternal society in which laws expressed the majority will, public office was open to all, taxation according to ability to pay, marriage a civil contract, and religion decided individually. As an afterthought, Hodgson decided that the 'general struggle for Freedom cannot overlook the Injuries of the Fairer Part', and in 1796 he published his *Proposals for Publishing by Subscription A treatise called the FEMALE CITIZEN or a Historical, Political and Philosophical Enquiry into THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN As Members of Society*. Subscriptions of half a crown were to be received by the author or the Universalist bookseller, H D Symonds, also a member of the one true Church. (20)

In 1828 Hetherington described the membership as

9 Tailors, 5 Shoemakers, 4 Dealers in Spirituous Liquors,  
5 Haberdashers, 2 Curriers, 2 Cork-Cutters, 1 Hlf-pay Officer,  
1 Tallow Chandler, 1 Attorney, 1 Printer, 1 Tobacconist,  
1 Sincere Brass Finisher, and about 30 Nondescripts,  
exclusive of Females and children who are born members. (21)

The list of members for 1843 contains 46 different trades, of which wine merchants, tailors and watchmakers are the largest groups. (22)

These tradesmen formed a close-knit community of mutual self-help and shared ideals. Like other radical artisans they looked to the destruction of aristocratic power to remove the corruption which was degrading the moral tone of society, and preventing the spread of

reason, education, higher morality and political virtue. (23) William Coates even hinted at a sense of class solidarity when he claimed that if all the dissenting Elders were gathered together, the plain untitled Freethinking Christian would be ejected as 'not an Elder, but a Haberdasher'. Their immediate social and economic situation must have helped to shape their political demands, and their concerns as a business community. (24)

There is no evidence of political activity for the early years of the true Church of God, though it is likely in view of the later involvement with the Spencean Philanthropists that some members attended the first recorded meeting of Spencean groups in 1801. The society's first public notoriety coincided with the upturn of Spencean activity in 1807, when Thompson returned from the country to settle dissensions. (25) He set up a new meeting house at the old Pauls Head Tavern in Cateaton Street in December 1807, and embarked on a programme of public education through debates on religious subjects with large and serious audiences. Topics included the Trinity, Atonement, Original Sin, Angels, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, the Millennium and public preachers - all, but the Millennium, derided by the Church.

Such was the popularity of these debates, and in particular one on the existence of the devil, that the Bishop of London had the Lord Mayor call the leaders to the Mansion House in February 1808 to demand an explanation of their religious opinions. The leaders refused, but persevered against lengthy bureaucratic obstacles in

registering their meeting place in the Bishop's Court. The affair became known through the public prints, and such crowds flocked to the meetings of the sect (including one of the city marshals and a shorthand writer each time) that it was obliged to discontinue evening meetings in Cateaton Street, because the room, holding several hundred, was in danger of collapse. (26)

To accommodate the growing congregation, in 1811 the Church built a new meeting house in Jewin Street, Moorfields, close to Little Windmill Street where the Spencean society had just been set up at the Sign of the Fleece. Thompson published an account of the Church's principles in *Evidences of Revealed Religion* (1811), in an attempt to refute the *Age of Reason* and the religion of nature by turning the Deist's arguments against them. Christianity, he argued, was pure Deism because it comprehended 'a religion of nature simplified and elucidated so as to meet and suit the circumstances and ability of the meanest capacity'. But it was only rendered truly valuable by the scripture promise of pardon to sinners and a future state, without which there was no motive for moral improvement. Knowledge of the one living and true God cannot be got from nature alone. (27)

*Evidences* shows that religion and politics were inseparable in Thompson's thought already. He condemned the logic of Paine's deist argument as a 'farrago of blind credulity and scepticism', but afforded him the greatest respect as a political writer. Mankind was under the greatest obligation to him for his inimitable works of political government, his excellent and just principles, and looked



to a system of government similar to what he proposed. But the French experience showed the folly of giving a pure and enlightened system of government to an ignorant and immoral people. Society was not ready to receive Godwin's *Political Justice*, just and refined though it was. There was a need to prepare the world to make it fit to receive pure religion and virtuous government, when the scriptural prophecies would be fulfilled. (27)

The organ for this process of preparation was to be the *Freethinking Christian Magazine*, launched that year to divest Christianity of 'monstrous doctrines, sacred mysteries, impossible ceremonies' and priestcraft, and to 'induce men to embrace a religion which is in itself as simple as it is beautiful'. It was to 'shake superstition, establish a system of hope and truth, virtue and goodness, amend the heart, improve morals, and dignify humanity'. (28) Francis Place welcomed the new journal, writing to Thompson and Fearon that he had read the prospectus with pleasure, and was persuaded that the work undertaken 'will, if not speedily suppressed, be of service to the cause of truth'. (29) He feared the 'unsociable and malignant passions it will excite in the enemies of truth..our amiable and benign Attorney General', but promised to contribute an account of creation, and historical evidence for the authenticity of the gospels.

However, the *Freethinking Christian Magazine* managed to survive for four years, despite some outspoken criticism of the government, by maintaining its fairly moderate stand on reason and revelation. The first editor, George Cannon, must have been kept in check by

Thompson. His own freethought journal, *The Theological Inquirer* of 1815, claimed to be open to all religious opinions, and did in fact give space to Freethinking Christians and Unitarians, but it was mainly an organ of infidel philosophy - Shelley's *Queen Mab*, Paine, Voltaire, d'Holbach, Annet, Tindal and Toland - and only lasted four months. There are numerous references to the philosophes in the *Freethinking Christian Magazine*, and indeed the Church had an extensive library of freethought as well as rational religion. (30) But the main thrust of the journal was Christian and Universalist, emphasising the unity of the Deity, the universality of his love, and the key role of revelation in determining belief.

These principles were asserted with a total conviction that suggests that they saw free enquiry only a means of persuading others of the Truth. 'Truth is the end of all our researches, and truth must finally prevail, when investigation is free and discussion unfettered'. (31) Other forms of Christianity were roundly condemned, along with priestcraft, ritual and ceremony, and all doctrines apart from the resurrection, miracles, and the final judgement and restoration. (32) Special venom was reserved for the Parliament Court Unitarians. The *Monthly Repository* published in May 1808 an account of the Freethinking Christians which described their principles and success in attracting considerable attention, but found them 'coarse' in their abuse of other Christians, and alleged that their reply to this was so 'ill-written, so frivolous, so unintelligible, and so boastful' that it could not merit a place in a publication demanding 'orthography, grammar and sense'. (33)

The Freethinking Christians dismissed this as a 'crude' attack, and the Unitarians as rich men, too idle to think for themselves, who would rather pay a man to pray and think for them - like Aspland, with his 'solid pudding' of £300 a year. They condemned their lax church discipline, their tavern feasts, 'drinking, smoaking and huzzaing', their attendance at theatres, balls and assemblies, their condoning dancing and cards, paying for pews. (34)

These harsh puritanical strictures on behaviour and belief derived from the Church's strong emphasis on moral improvement, obedience and discipline. The Church constitution laid down strict behavioural rules, and insisted upon control over the actions and gifts of members. Women were required to show retiring modesty, silence and observe the Pauline injunction not to presume to teach. (35) Thompson publicly advised his daughter, on the occasion of her marriage, to maintain strict delicacy in thought, word and action, never to use tears, to look cheerful even when ill, and to avoid the follies and extravagances of other women. The care of her husband was her first concern, the management of her household her second. She was to have particular regard to the convenience of her husband, always making his pleasures and interests her own, dressing to please him, and being kind and benevolent to the servants. (36) The daughter in question, Mary Ann, may have been in need of this advice, since she was already experienced in philosophical and theological debate, and perhaps something of a feminist. (37)

The Freethinking Christians vindicated their severity on the grounds of the purity of their principles, recognising the criticisms of their severe and inflexible manner; 'no sect or party escapes the lash, none more roughly handled than the Unitarians and the clergy'. (38) But they were prepared to make common cause with all dissenters over the 1811 Protestant Dissenting Ministers Bill, writing to Sidmouth that it was 'the duty of every well-disposed conscientious dissenter to unite, free from all party disputes, to obtain their rights and privileges which as freemen they are entitled to by the English constitution'. (39)

Civil and religious liberty were major preoccupations of the *Freethinking Christian Magazine* from its inception. It argued that the triumph of the dissenters' petitions on the 1811 Bill must lead to 'that to which the nation is so anxiously looking, and so justly entitled, and which the present circumstances so much require, a radical reform in the Common House of Parliament, the only safeguard of our civil and religious liberties'. (40) In December another letter to Sidmouth refused the expected 'fawning servility and humble deference' in favour of the 'strain of freedom', and in a tone of moral and social superiority, compared the Church of England's cheating, lying, swearing, foxhunting, cockfighting and boxing games with the merits of dissenting tinkers, tailors and coalheavers. (41) Freethought was a cardinal principle, and in 1812 the *Magazine* supported Daniel Eaton during his trial for publishing the third part of *Age of Reason*. (42)

The duty of preparing for the coming millennium remained the chief concern of the Freethinking Christians, however, and in 1812 Thompson instituted a Christian Review of the Political World as a regular item in the *Magazine*, not allegedly from a desire to interfere in politics, but in the hope of drawing moral instruction from passing events. But radical reform was presented as an essential prerequisite of the millennium, which could only be achieved under a just government, not a corrupt one engaged in an unjust war. The fulfilment of biblical prophecies required that 'the people be perfectly satisfied with government and their own condition'. They must be united, their resources undiminished, 'their government and revenue administered with integrity and economy, and above all that the cause they are engaged in be just, and such as can entitle them to look for the protection of heaven'. (43)

Thompson used this column to present the political perspective of the City tradesman, infused with a sense of high moral purpose. In a catalogue of tradesman's grievances, he condemned the 'boroughmonger faction' as responsible for economic ills: increased taxation, the high price of provisions and rents. It was also to blame for the trade depression, the want of employment for manufacturers, and the probable establishment of those manufactures on the continent or America through the American war. As a businessman he lamented the almost universal bankruptcy resulting from wild speculation and paper currency, and predicted that the prohibition of commerce to the continent and the American war would turn the mercantile class against the government. (44)

Events abroad were interpreted as the fulfilment of biblical prophecies since the French Revolution, with the Alliance as the Beast of Revelation. It had told us to expect the destruction of all anti-Christian power, whether civil, political or religious, as harbinger of pure religion, good government, and universal peace. 'We are of the opinion that the work has begun and has been going on for the last twenty years'. Napoleon was extolled as the instrument of God. He had destroyed the power of the Pope, put down the inquisition in Spain and Portugal, abolished the feudal system and all distinctions respecting religious opinions. 'Christians in general considered he was the instrument in the hands of the Almighty for the destruction of that beastly power which has domineered and tyrannised both spiritually and politically over all the nations of the earth...they saw a new era arising, teeming with blessings to the human race, and that the following passage was truly applicable, Rev.xix, 1,2,3'. (45)

Admiration for Bonaparte was also common among the Spenceans. Thomas Hardy and Jonathon Panther warmly supported him; Evans deplored his defeat in 1815; Preston's group deplored his incarceration on Saint Helena; and for John George, he was 'the greatest friend of humanity that ever lived'. (46) The coincidence of their views with those of the Freethinking Christians derived from their very similar millennial beliefs. With the post-war depression millennial speculation renewed along with political agitation, and the Society of Spencean Philanthropists set up in 1814 included several Freethinking Christians. (47)

They had decided to discontinue their journal at the end of that year, claiming that their mission had been accomplished with the triumph of truth and reason; that priestcraft had been exposed, sceptic and atheist dismayed, and Christianity risen superior to all opposition. Another reason advanced was that the labour was burdensome to 'men engaged in bustling pursuits of life'. (48) It is likely however that they now saw the Spencean Society as a more appropriate medium for fulfilling their role as instruments of God's purpose. The Freethinking Christians' political programme was too much orientated to the economic preoccupations of City tradesmen to include agrarian reform, but their millennial beliefs corresponded closely to the apocalyptic tone of Spence's later writings, and the increasingly Christian orientation of the Society under Thomas Evans.

According to Place, Evans 'found the principles of his system in the bible', and under his influence the Spenceans placed great emphasis on their status as Christians, even to the extent of calling themselves Christian Philanthropists in 1819. (49) Like the Freethinking Christians, the vigorous historicity of their view of Christ, coupled with their materialist social philosophy, led them to emphasise the role of human agency in securing the millennium. Both groups sought radical social and political change, in the words of the Society's *Address* of 1815, a 'radical adjustment of the social system on the broad basis of individual justice'. (50) *Giant-killer* in 1814 defined the Spencean purpose as 'the restoration of the New Jerusalem state of happiness on earth, and not in heaven', and George Fordham of the Jewin Street Church contributed an Universalist

interpretation of Prophetic Records to the Spencean journal of 6th August that year. (51)

Fordham's later writings clearly reveal the extent to which Universalist principles of justice and equality had become consistent with advanced political thought. His *Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage Recommended to the Rich and Poor* of 1817 combined standard radical demands for popular representation and closer control of representatives with an apocalyptic warning to the government, on behalf of an 'oppressed and starving people' that reform must come, if not by peaceful means, then by anarchy and confusion. The government would be 'answerable for all the burnings, and all the plunderings, and all the devastation, and all the blood that follows'.

Fordham seems to have published nothing else for nearly forty years, when *The Age We Live In* of 1855 was dedicated to Layard and Administrative Reform. It thundered a puritanical condemnation of an age characterised as Go-Ahead - showy and dishonest, Uncharitable - the weak to the wall, Convivial - too much eating and drinking, Commercial - dedicated to the pursuit of wealth; an age of Thinking by Deputy, and of Indecision. Instead he urged the abolition of class barriers and the removal of all inequalities to make opportunity open to all, office according to merit. Men must live as brethren and strive to help the world in its progress to perfection. (52)

Universalists and Spenceans shared one millennial vision.



Close proximity to the Mulberry Tree must have facilitated intercourse between the two groups, and John Savage, undertaker and blind-maker, was chairman of the Moorfields Mulberry Tree section in 1817 until he switched to the less obtrusive Bethnal Green section. (53) Spies reported close links between the Jewin Street Church and Evans' chapel in Worship Street, Shoreditch, and that these meetings frequently adjourned to the Mulberry Tree. Freethinking Christians were also reported to have attended Spencean debates. On 18th November 1817, B wrote to Conant that Evans' Chapel had debated the divinity of Christ, 'the chief speakers Unitarians (sic) are professed Freethinkers and said the greater part of the New Testament a forgery calculated to work on the passions and credulity of mankind. A Mr Coates, wine-dealer in Holborn Hill spoke very freely... about ten speakers design to establish similar meetings for free discussion in different parts of town and country - the principal object suspected to encourage Unitarian principles'.

On 2nd December Watson, Wedderburn, Jameson, Savadge, Evans, Galloway, and 'some of the Spencean school' were 'disseminating sedition and disaffection'; their 'deistical and abominable poison contaminates morals'. The 20th of that month brought a further report on the 'very diabolical and incendiary expressions and threats delivered by some of the leading Characters of disaffection and rebellion', Wedderburn, Savadge, Preston etc., and 'some of the Unitarians and Freethinking Christians encouraged by Coats, Thompson', who with Galloway, Sherwin etc 'are the encouragers and Movers of the seditious Deistical and Rebellious sentiments'. (54)

Thompson and Coates wrote to the government denying that they associated with extremists, but Thompson is named as having given secret financial assistance to Preston in 1817. (55)

Despite his evident sympathies with the Spenceans, as a tradesman Thompson could not afford to be associated with ultra-radicals and revolutionaries. For him and the more prosperous of his group, the City of London and Court of Common Council offered a more respectable opportunity for political activism. (56) Thompson entered local politics in 1810, and quickly rose to prominence in the cause of civil and religious freedom representing the ward of Faringdon Without. When he retired in 1824, a resolution of full Wardmote expressed deep regret at his determination to forebear rendering 'able, judicious, and independent exertions in support of civil and religious liberty in this ward', and thanked him for fourteen years excellent services in upholding the honour, credit, and independence of the ward. (57)

There is evidence of those exertions in support of civil liberty in July 1819, when Samuel Thompson, 'Gin-Shop Keeper', is named as a speaker at a reform meeting in Smithfield market which attracted up to 80,000. The following September, the Court of Common Council demanded an enquiry into Peterloo to punish the guilty, and on the 29th, 8,000 liverymen led by Waithman, Hunt, Thompson and Henry Fearon applauded revolutionary speeches and argued violent resolutions of censures of ministers. 'A more riotous and tumultuous meeting has never taken place'. (58)

But the Freethinking Christians had always been reluctant to identify themselves with the secular radicals for fear of compromising their primarily religious objectives. Thompson as Elder advised caution to provincial Church members who became involved in the reform movement and trade unions. In August 1819 the Dewsbury branch wrote that Friend Hodgson was engaged 'in promoting the Union (not a Political union, but one for the regulation of wages) with a zeal we think beyond the bounds of prudence'. And Friend Bragshaw of Yeadon had unadvisedly involved himself in the cause concerns of the radical reformers. He had been written to by two Friends but sadly did not discontinue his exertions, only attempted to justify his conduct.

(59)

Thompson replied that the Jewin Street society had been reassured by Bragshaw's defence, and decided that he had acted with great temper, moderation and prudence. Rather surprisingly in view of his public activities that summer, he continued; 'if we could persuade ourselves that Freethinking Christians are justified under the particular circumstances of the Times in interfering at all in Meetings of the description alluded to, then we are ready to acknowledge that our friend Bragshaw has done so in a becoming and indeed praiseworthy manner'. But he advocated refraining from all interference with such Meetings, though sympathising with their noble and free sentiments. It was improper for a member of the Church to become an Itinerant Orator of the cause of Reform and hawk his talents from place to place. Members would risk life, liberty and property - such meetings were more likely to be determined by force than argument, because the

leaders were motivated more by ambition than by the sufferings of the people. There was danger too to their Christian principles in identifying themselves with such meetings. Better to stand by the simple and dignified truths of Christianity. However, it was legitimate to campaign constitutionally for reform in ward or parish. (59)

Caution probably induced the Church to loosen its links with the Spenceans from 1818. Meetings at the Worship Street Chapel ceased sometime in the first half of the year, and although lively debates started again in Archer Street, Soho, from June, Wedderburn came increasingly to dominate proceedings. Around this time divisions among the Spenceans became irreconcilable, and the quarrel between Evans and Watson, Wedderburn, Preston and John George resulted in the latter setting up the majority of the congregation at Archer Street and then Hopkins Street, and Evans leading a splinter group in Cripplegate, and finally returning to the Mulberry Tree. (60) Frustrated in their vision of a Spencean millennium, the Freethinking Christians turned to America as offering the possibility of a just and equal society, civil and religious liberty.

Emigration to America was becoming increasingly fashionable among nonconformists and political radicals, and Morris Birkbeck's book on his Illinois settlement aroused considerable interest in England. The Dewsbury branch reported that several members had emigrated, and at Jewin Street Brother Savage had recently returned from a two year visit with news of other Friends there. He would have coincided with

the two Spenceans, Charles Pendrill, LCS veteran, and the younger Watson, who went over in February 1817. Ever cautious, the Jewin Street society decided to sound out the prospects, political, spiritual and commercial, of this new land, and in 1819 deputed Henry Fearon to go over and investigate. (61)

Fearon's *Sketches of America* of 1819 went into a third edition that year, and was serialised in the *Monthly Repository*, *Poor Man's Guardian*, and *Carpenters Monthly Political Magazine* of 1831-2. . It was, as he claimed, a 'homely intelligence', geared to the needs and aspirations of tradesmen, mechanics and working people, with information on prices, wages, rents and opportunities for individual trades and manufactures. (62) He concluded that the capitalist might get 7% with good security, but the lawyer and doctor would not succeed, and the literary man would starve. The shopkeeper might do well, but not better than in London; the clerk and shopman would just get board and lodging. The necessary trades would do well, but those in cotton, linen, woollens, silks, glass and earthenware, would find no employment. Only the labouring man would find it worthwhile to emigrate. (63)

Fearon was equally sceptical of the popular image of America as a religious and political utopia. There was legal liberty of religion, he affirmed, but no fondness for rational enquiry; a 'cold, uniform bigotry seems to pervade all parties, equally inaccessible to argument, opposed to investigation, and I fear, indifferent to truth'. And it was certainly not the 'political Elysium which a

certain unprincipled author and bookseller has so floridly described'. (64)

*Sketches of America* eloquently portrays the spiritual and material aspirations of the Freethinking Christians, illustrating the relationship between their religious beliefs and their social, economic and political aims. These were the 'men of capital, industry, sober habits and regular pursuits' to whom the work was addressed, at a time when government repression, with the Six Acts, seemed to postpone indefinitely the prospect of reform. They were 'men of reflection, who apprehended approaching evils; men of upright and conscientious minds, to whose happiness civil and religious liberty were essential; and men of domestic feeling who wished to provide for the future support and prosperity of their offspring'. (65)

Disappointed in their hopes of finding a just and prosperous society elsewhere, the Jewin Street radicals threw themselves with renewed enthusiasm into political agitation, as it increased after Peterloo. On September 25th 1819 the spy John Shegog reported

Chief meetings this week were led by Deists and Infidels - many attended through curiosity, Deists, idlers and pickpockets. In Applegate Churchyard, Stevens well known Infidel Minister of the Freethinking Church at Jewin Street. At Salsberry Square Meeting Mr Thompson and his Son in Law Coates who were chief orators and also members of said Infidel Church in Jewin Street and the chief authors of the new publication called the Radical

Reformers Register. (66)

Their intentions, he said, were

to overthrow all the Excellent Institutions of this highly favoured land and to let loose the Dogs of Plunder, and Rapine upon the Industrious, Peaceable and Religious. (67)

After the Cato Street conspiracy, Shegog again linked Freethinking Christians to Spenceans. On March 1st 1820 he sent another sensational report on the 'Deistical and Treasonable friends' of the blindmaker Savage, who ran a house of 'Treason, Sedition and Profligacy', and on March 24th he accused Thompson, with Wooler and Pearson, of trying to subvert Thistlewood's jurors. (68) On June 6th the committee organising the disaffected to acclaim the Queen on her visit to London is named as Thompson, Coates, Stevens, Wooler, Dolby, Thelwell, Davison, Thistlewood and Griffin, and on June 26th, Stevens, Coates and Thompson are again prominent in this 'revolutionary committee'. On December 18th Shegog linked the Jewin Street Universalists to those at Parliament Court as the 'leading characters who delude the uninformed and seduce the lower orders into disaffection and political division and discontent'. (69)

The upsurge of popular emotion after Peterloo, and hysteria over the Queen Caroline affair afforded ample opportunity for what Thompson may well have considered constitutional agitation, even if Shegog did not. But radicals needed a context of political excitement to attract mass activity, and with the revival of trade in 1821, the radical impetus was diverted into trade societies and cooperation. (70)

Owen's plan had been discussed by the Freethinking Christians at Spencean meetings, and as the prospect of a Spencean millennium faded, for younger Universalists especially, the Owenite millennium took its place as the focus for radical activity. The hardliners under Thompson on the other hand retreated into their exclusive conviction of alone possessing divine truth, alone consecrated as God's instruments to prepare the world for the fulfilment of divine prophecies. Inevitably such divergence of opinion on the means to achieve the millennium caused increasing dissension within the society, culminating in a number of expulsions and finally its division into two irreconcilable camps.



## REFERENCES

1. This is clearly a reformist vision inspired by religious belief, not a religious expression of political ideals, or an alternative to political action. See E P Thompson, *Making* (1974 ed.) especially pp 419-79; A Goodwin *The Friends of Liberty* (1979) pp 396-9, 491-3; F K Prochaska, 'Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* revisited' in *Journal of History of Ideas* xxxiii (1972) pp 575-6.
2. Samuel Dobell, *Brief Description of the Principles of the Freethinking Christians* (1824) pp 17, 19.
3. William Coates, *A Plea for the Unity of the Christian Church* (1821) pp 6, 9. Henry Hetherington, *Principles and Practice Contrasted* (1828) p 8.
4. *Brief Description* pp 6, 17. There is a marked similarity with the discipline of the General Baptists outlined in John Dobell's *Circular Letter to General Baptists* in Kent of 1807, pp 4-5, 6. They are exhorted to attend service, acquire knowledge and educate youth, promote discipline in churches and conform to the established rules of the society. Members must exercise diligence and mutual care, watchfulness over others, guarding the spiritual and temporal interests of each other and promoting the welfare of friends. The Dobell family dominated the Cranbrook society (8 Dobells out of 18 signatories to letter in Church Book of Battle Freethinking Christians, September 1818) and around 1818 these Baptists united

with Jewin Street. The Dobells probably had business contacts with Thompson, and later John Dobell, author of *Man unfit to govern man*, married one of his daughters. Memoir in *Christian Reformer* (1838).

5. *Brief Account of the Church of God Known as Freethinking Christians* (1841).

6. Hetherington, *op.cit.* p6. Henry Hetherington (1792-1849) was a printer who became a leading figure in the Owenite movement and the campaign for freedom of the press. In 1828 he rebelled against Thompson's authoritarian government of the society. A Jew, Abraham Elias Casson, had been invited to their discussions on the millennium (which was to follow the return of the Jews), but his application for membership was opposed by Thompson on the grounds that he refused to profess belief in those scriptures accepted by the Church. Casson had a good deal of support in the society, and to silence all opposition, Thompson announced that the Church was in danger, and under the absolute authority of the Elder, revoked the elections of deacons, and expelled all those in disagreement, John and Charles Savage, Hetherington, Charles Barker and Benjamin Warden. *ibid* pp 3-29.

7. *ibid* p 6.

8. *iv* p 274.

9. S Thompson, *Evidences of Revealed Religion* (1811, 1842 4th ed.)

Memoir appended.

10. Dobell, *Brief Description* p 11.

11. *Principles and Practice Contrasted* p 29.

12. *ibid* pp 13,12.

13. *Memoir op.cit.*

14. i pp 503-27; ii pp 23-8, 74-82, 104-110. *Memoir*.

15 *Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell* ed. 'E J' (1878) pp 66-7.

16. Church Book of Battle Freethinking Christians. March 1819 entry reports branches in Dewsbury and Wymeswold as well as those newly joined from Battle and Cranbrook. These may well have been the result of missionary journeys on the part of Winchester or Vidler (the Battle connection is clearly his), or of business connections with the Jewin Street tradesmen. They remained in communication until at least 1846.

17. *Life and Letters* p 66. Fordham's reformist activity is discussed below.

18. ed. J Baylen and Gossman, *Biog. Dict. of Mod. Brit. Radicals* (1979) ii, p 124.

19. Register of Dissenters Meeting Houses, Guildhall Library ms 9580/3

20. Ian McCalman, 'A Radical Underworld in Early 19th Century London; Thomas Evans, Robert Wedderburn, George Cannon, and their Circle, 1800-1835'; unpub. Ph D thesis Monash 1984, pp 82, 91. *Commonwealth* pp vi, 19-85.

21. *op.cit.* Preface.

22. Church Book of Battle FCs.

23. I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics* (1979) p93.

24. *A Plea for the Unity of the Christian Church* (1821) p13. J. Brewer, 'English Radicalism in the Age of George III' in ed. J G Pocock, *Three British Revolutions* (1982) pp 323-45, argues for the practical incentives for reform amongst tradesmen, threatened by an increasingly powerful executive, a centralising state, and single party government. It was this that led them to demand accountability, the removal of placemen, more frequent elections, and the representation of taxpayers.

25. M S Chase, 'The Land and the Working Classes: English Agrarianism circa 1775-1851'; unpub. PhD thesis Sussex, (1984) p87. The evidence for an earlier Spencean connection is discussed above in the chapter on the Parliament Court society.

26. Memoir, *FC Magazine* ii pp 54-5, *Monthly Repository* May 1808. The devil was the object of some contemporary concern, and figured prominently in Joanna Southcott's writings; *A Dispute between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness* (1802).

27. pp 8, 17-8, 62. Thompson offered it to Sidmouth as a more effective antidote to Paine than prosecuting Carlile. The fourth edition won an approving notice from the *MR*.

28. i pp 1-25.

29. Add.mss. 35,152 f 3.

30. R Bayley- Potts, ex-member, writing in *Republican*, 15 Mar. 1822, pp 331-2.

31. i, Preface, viii.

32. Thompson denied the resurrection of the body of Christ, i p582, against Teulon's affirmation that this had been agreed by all, ii pp 23-8.

33. *Monthly Repository* May 1808.

34. *FC Magazine* i pp 153, 673. And see ii p 107 on those who 'will benevolently teach men with empty bellies, starving families, and clothed in rags, to practise their virtues of humility, gratitude and

submission'. See too William Coates in iii pp 291-2 on Cobbett as 'a knave' for alleging that the Trinity was the root of all religion in *Political Register* May 15, 1813, and G Spater, *William Cobbett the Poor Mans Friend* (1932) p 546: Cobbett said Coates was 'the very refuse and offal of Deism, and a disguised infidel'. Poor Richard Wright was abused as 'inferior to a third-rate Methodist parson', ii, p391.

35. *FC Magazine* iv Appendix. Advice to new Battle branch, 1818, in Battle Church Book is for women to concentrate on their domestic duties, and being 'retiring, kind and useful' at home. This all contrasts with the Parliament Court society's championship of women's rights urged by Wright in *Universalist Miscellany*.

36. iv pp 269-74, Advice to a Marrying Daughter.

37. Contributions to *FC Magazine* i (1811) pp 493-4, iv (1814) p 109; to *Theological Inquirer* (1815), a lively refutation of Shelley's *Refutation of Deism*, pp 242-5.

38. i p 254, June 1811.

39. i p 269.

40. i pp 275-307.

41. i p 528.

42. McCalman identifies Eaton as a member of the Freethinking Christians, *op.cit.* p 109, although his published principles are very different from theirs, eg. *Politics for the People* (1794).

43. ii p 416.

44. ii pp 418-9, 509. It also extended condemnation to the millions enslaved and oppressed in the W. Indies and Ireland, castigated court morals, and openly championed Burdett, Romilly and Sheridan. See too Prothero *op.cit.* pp 77, 313.

45. ii p 549; iii p 250; iv pp 119-27, the Empire of Napoleon predicted p 158. The Code Napoleon and 1799 Constitution were praised as models of liberty and equality.

46. Chase, *op.cit.* p 89.

47. See HQ reports listed below, Fordham/Giantkiller connection, and overlap of at least one Savage and Hodgson.

48. iv Preface pp vi,vii.

49. Add.mss. 27,809 f 99. Chase *op.cit.* p 101.

50. *ibid* p 104.

51. Add.mss. 27,808. O Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and his Connection* (1927) p 128. Three Extracts from an Introduction to Prophetic Records: 'these have no kind of reference or relation to the final judgement of all men, or their resurrection; the future punishment of the wicked, or the reward of the righteous; but solely apply to the temporal punishment of the nations, great and small, leagued with anti-Christ'.

52. *Annual Parliaments* (1891 ed.) pp 7-19,20; *The Age We Live In* pp 20-37, 5-16.

53. Chase p 122. Savage prepared for burial John Hooper, acquitted of High Treason, and set up a subscription for his expenses and headstone. *Public Notice to Friends of Patriotism* HO 40/8/4 f 153, Chase p 129. The proposal to turn the funeral into a mass demonstration was abandoned because of police activity, HO 40/7 (4) f 2079, 42/173.

54. HO 40/7/3 f 2043-4; 42/172; 40/8/4 f 145; see also ff 153 and 155 for Savage, 169 for discussion on Owen's plan and religion at the Mulberry Tree, 171 on all at Mulberry Tree having just come from Unitarian meeting at Worship Street. See too 40/7/3 ff 2036-7, 2029; 42/171, 13th Nov. 1817; 42/172; 40/8/3 ff 119,20.

55. HO 42/156/3 6 Dec. 1816; TS 11/204/952 f 652; TS 11/199/368. HO 40/7 f 1. 'A' Sep. 1817, Abel Hall named Potter as conspirator. Thompson had naturally been interested in other millennial movements, and visited Joanna Southcott and Brothers, whom he dismissed rather



51. Add.mss. 27,808. O Rudkin, *Thomas Spence and his Connection* (1927) p 128. Three Extracts from an Introduction to Prophetic Records: 'these have no kind of reference or relation to the final judgement of all men, or their resurrection; the future punishment of the wicked, or the reward of the righteous; but solely apply to the temporal punishment of the nations, great and small, leagued with anti-Christ'.

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55. HO 42/156/3 6 Dec. 1816; TS 11/204/952 f 652; TS 11/199/868. HO 40/7 f 1. 'A' Sep. 1817, Abel Hall named Potter as conspirator. Thompson had naturally been interested in other millennial movements, and visited Joanna Southcott and Brothers, whom he dismissed rather

confusingly as 'impostor and prophet'. *Principles and Practice Contrasted* p 6.

56. Prothero *op.cit.* pp 74-99. J R Dinwiddy, 'The Patriotic Linen-Draper; Robert Waithman and the Revival of Radicalism in the City of London, 1797-1818' in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 45 (1972) pp 266-82. J Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth* (1982) p 298.

57. Memoir in *Evidences of Revealed Religion*. Even here he was accused of dictatorship.

58. Guildhall Library Lord Mayor's Letter Book, Ms 493 ff 216, 263. *Democratic Recorder* 20 Oct. 1819. Corporation of London Record Office, Minutes of the Proceedings of the Court of Common Council, Charles Augustus Savage was a committee member, f 98,101, Journal of Common council f 154-5.

59. Church Book of Battle FCs. Joseph Brayshaw was a prominent Radical Reformer in Leeds and friend of James Watson. See *Republican*, 21 June, 1822.

60. Chase, pp 132-3.

61. Richard Flower was a Freethinking Christian, McCalman p 91, and perhaps brother of Birkbeck's companion in Illinois. Cobbett fiercely attacked Birkbeck's book, and Fearon's, *A Year's Residence in USA* (1819 ed.), Spater, *op.cit.* p 371, and p 573 which notes Richard

Flowers' *Refutation of the Misrepresentation of Mr Cobbett* (1819).

See too Chase pp 121-2, and HO 42/160, 17 Feb.

62. *Sketches of America* p xii.

63. pp 22, 35, 89.

64. pp 45, 49.

65. p xi.

66. HO 42/195. John Shegog was minister of a Methodist group in N. Audley Street in 1811. Register of Dissenters Meeting Houses, Guildhall Library Ms. 9580/3. His references to Freethinking Christians carry all the animus of bitter theological opposition to their doctrinal principles as well as to their radicalism.

67. HO 44/5.

68. HO 40/15/1.

69. *ibid*, and see above.

70. Prothero *op.cit.* p154.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### FREETHINKING CHRISTIANS AND THE OWENITE MILLENNIUM

The radical demonstrations over the Queen's funeral marked the last political excitement of 1821. But the experience of open political demonstrations was to be repeated by trade societies later in the decade, and the alliance of mechanics and radicals continued with Cartwright's Friends of Civil and Religious Liberty to promote Catholic Emancipation, and Gast's Anglo-Carbonarian Union. Like Owen, and like the Universalists, the Union looked to a new social order based on human brotherhood. Its Creed and Catechism proclaimed in the name of true Christianity the unity and equality of all men, and their just rights to the full produce of their labour and a share in the abundance of the earth. (1) The close affinity between Trade Unionist, Owenite and Universalist gospels led several Freethinking Christians to take a leading part in the move by working men to reinterpret Owenism in their own terms. Hetherington, the Savage brothers, and the Marylebone saddler Benjamin Warden became prominent members of the London Cooperative Society. Their independence of spirit, and their involvement with secular radicalism inevitably led to their separation from the Jewin Street society, as it affirmed its exclusivity and commitment to inculcating divine truth.

The Freethinking Christians had departed from their exclusive principle in 1819 to invite the Unitarians to their evening discussions, but found that they interfered too much with their mutual improvement sessions. (2) However, they debated with their other branches in Battle, Dewsbury and Wimeswoud (sic) whether to join the new Unitarian association to promote civil rights, especially on marriage. The Freethinking Christians had been at the forefront of the campaign to make marriage a purely civil institution, urging this in their journals and the *Theological Inquirer*. Thompson made the occasion of his daughters' marriages an opportunity to send a formal protest to the Home Secretary. The exclusive principle prevailed, and the Church decided not to join the association, but continued to campaign, with a petition to *The Times* in December 1824. A debate in the House of Lords in 1825 called forth the condemnation of the Bishop of Chester on their activities. (3)

The certainty of possession of divine truth, and intolerance of all other opinions increasingly distanced the exclusive party within the Church from other radical movements. Thompson's *Reply to Mr Wright's Thoughts on Social Prayer* of 1819 argued that he had utterly failed to prove it either reasonable or consistent with the New Testament. Against this he claimed divine authority for the Freethinking Christian practice of private prayer and mutual instruction. Theirs was a 'complete system of church discipline and specific plan of proceeding in Christian assemblies' wholly from the New Testament; 'so complete indeed and so specific that the wisdom of man cannot exceed or amend them, whilst their excellency and adaptation to all

possible circumstances prove them to be the work of divine wisdom'.

(4)

Such sublime assurance necessarily enhanced the exclusive spirit of the Church, and according to Sydney Dobell, some younger members revived the Judaic idea of being consecrated to a superior existence, separate and distinct from the world. John Dobell, Thompson's son-in-law, was one of the keenest, allowing no intimate association with those who did not share his religious beliefs, and not allowing his children to attend school. (5) Another son-in-law, William Coates, was probably also in this exclusive group, since in 1821 he published *A Plea for the Unity of the Christian Church* which in effect urged all Christians to unite under the authority and discipline of the one true Church of God. He resisted all attempts to 'extend the pale of the church beyond those limits which Jesus himself has prescribed'. He rejected the pretensions of all other sects on the grounds that only his met the three criteria of reasonableness and necessity, the clear and express declarations of the New Testament, and the apostolic example. (6)

This exclusiveness would make the church a more effective medium for social enlightenment and regeneration. Coates argued that the purity and morality of the church should be preserved, whether it be regarded as a school for the improvement of its members, or an instrument for the reformation of society at large. Jesus himself had ordered that all those who should pervert princes, relax discipline,

or condemn authority of the church should be cast into the world to preserve the purity, peace and integrity of the church. (7)

Narrow dogmatism and intolerance of this order was bound to provoke opposition amongst more liberal and independent members, and a secession of some thirty took place. It was led by William Stevens, who published a reply to Coates' pamphlet entitled *An Antidote to Intolerance and Assumption* (1821). Stevens had been Elder when the Jewin Street meeting house was registered in 1810, and was identified by Shegog (along with Coates) as 'that well known Infidel Minister of the Freethinking Church at Jewin Street'. (8) Like Hetherington in 1828, Stevens rebelled against the restriction of individual liberty. The Freethinking Christians were treading under foot the rights of conscience and destroying that freedom of speech and action that they pretended to advocate. Religious liberty to them meant 'nothing more than the liberty to do and think as they please, and to controul and fetter the thoughts of others'.

Stevens quite reasonably pointed out that Coates' contention that the Jewin Crescent church was the true and only one meant that all the Apostles, Martyrs and millions of Christians over eighteen thousand years had laboured to produce a 'little puny squeaking mouse' of two hundred. (9) Stevens set up a Christian Assembly at no 6, the East side of Moorfields, still professing the same principles of individual improvement, mutual exhortation and discipline, and the ultimate virtue and consequent happiness of all creatures, but

defining the Church of God as 'all who fear God and work righteousness of every nation, tribe or kindred under heaven'. (10)

Coates had emphasised however that separation from the world did not remove the obligation of working for the reformation of society. With the dissolution of the Spencean Philanthropists the Church turned once again to print as the medium for preparing for the millennium. In 1823 a new journal, *The Freethinking Quarterly Register*, was launched. Its aims were to search after enlightened principles, prosecute fearless enquiry, and inculcate scripture truths; its principal tenets belief in revelation, peculiar views on doctrine and discipline. These last involved much outspoken criticism of Christianity at home and abroad: superstition, priestcraft and tyranny, the pretensions and encroachments of dissenters. Ritual, dogma, feasts and festivals were tested against reason and scripture.

The *Register*, like the *Magazine* featured a Review of the Political World which preached revolution under cover of protestations of non-involvement in politics. Jesus' kingdom was allegedly not of this world, and 'few Christians have actively interfered in political affairs without injury to their moral character'. But a Christian must necessarily participate equally with other men in the 'evil effects of vicious institutions' and 'feel deeply interested in the political circumstances of the country in which he dwells'. Influenced by the benevolent spirit of his religion, he must, more than any other man, 'feel deep commiseration for the sufferings of his fellow men..a strong sense of indignation at injustice and



oppression; the most ardent wish that every corrupt institution may be annihilated; and that the wisest, most virtuous and benevolent system of government may be established throughout the world'. (11)

The promise of the millennium was reaffirmed despite the restoration of 'those vile chains of kingly and priestly tyranny' under the 'diabolical compact' of the European powers. Thompson acknowledged that the benevolent philanthropist's hopes were blasted, his expectation of a general diffusion of light and knowledge, a dawning day of liberty, peace and happiness disappointed. But he argued that Revelation explained the unholy alliance, kingly and priestly tyranny, the sufferings of the masses and oppression by the few. The Holy Alliance was the Beast, and tyrannical powers and Beasts would be destroyed. There was no point in the cant of loyalty to legitimate monarchs and devotion to established governments when they were doomed to ultimate destruction. Nebuchadnezzar's madness was a punishment from God, and if George III had been an enemy to liberty, his must also have been a visitation of God's judgement. (12)

Thompson claimed that it was essential to 'discover and convey to the Christian every circumstance that marks the directing finger of God in the government of the world...lest he join in supporting what God has determined to destroy'. He quoted Paine's 'Book of Nature' as helpful in understanding God's purpose, but recommended Revelation as the means of seeing 'the plans of providence in their commencement..trace them in their progress..and perceive their ultimate accomplishment and destination'. (12) The Christian was

urged to participate in that final accomplishment of the divine scheme if only by civil disobedience.

The *Register's* invitation to political action was less explicit than that of *The Radical Magazine* of 1821, which can perhaps be identified as the new journal attributed by Shogog to Thompson and Coates. This urged poor infatuated countrymen to unite in the glorious cause of their country, of suffering humanity; to 'act constitutionally, act lawfully, reclaim your birthright of freemen'. (13) Thompson, nearing his sixtieth birthday, seems to have been losing his enthusiasm for political activity in the 1820s. In 1824 he retired from his civic duties in the ward of Faringdon Without, and the same year the *Register* ceased publication. Thereafter, he contented himself with promoting his doctrines through public debate, at the Rotunda and Optimist Chapel, the Jewin Street Church, and after 1831, the new chapel built in St John's Square, Clerkenwell. (14) But the dynamic of radical reform remained an essential element in the vision of Freethinking Christians, and it fell to other members of the society to associate themselves with the new opportunities for social and political change.

Of these opportunities, Owen's socialism was most obviously attractive to the Freethinking Christians, with its millenarian vision of a rational and just society. In America, a significant number of Owenite leaders were associated with millennial sects, or professed a type of Christianity which included elements of universalism, deism and rationalism. Universalism as later restated by Shepherd Smith reconciled Divine Revelation with the laws of

nature by means of a millenarian synthesis. (15) Unlike most millennial sects, the Freethinking Christians had always worked towards a specific social programme, rather than simply personal salvation. Like many British working men in the 1820s, some of the Church members began to reinterpret Owenism in their own terms. They turned his paternalist Villages of Cooperation into self-governing workers' associations to be created by the efforts of the workers themselves. (16)

The first number of *The Economist* founded by James Wilson in January, 1821 to promote cooperation mentioned the formation of a 'Cooperative and Economical Society' by journeymen, mainly printers, who included Henry Hetherington. It aimed to effect essential improvements in the condition of the working class and society at large. (17) Hetherington was shortly joined by the Marylebone saddler, Benjamin Warden, and together they helped to form the London Cooperative Society in 1824, which set up *The Cooperative Magazine* in 1826. James Watson and William Lovett, leaders of the Society, were then or later members of the Universalist group at Parliament Court.

Universalists had always considered that education was the crucial political tool to force open the political community, and Hetherington and Warden were active in promoting the Mechanics Institute, fighting to keep it open to all shades of religious and political opinion. In May 1828, Hetherington's application to use the theatre on Sunday mornings for Freethinking Christian debates, 'for a few respectable Christian tradesmen to hold a friendly Christian

conference' was deemed 'inexpedient'. But under pressure the committee agreed to allow the Friends of Civil and Religious Liberty to have Daniel O'Connell speak there in July, and the following year Hunt and Cobbett rescinded the ban on Sunday meetings and allowed the Freethinking Christians the theatre. (18)

The dynamic of the Universalist vision of a just and equal society was a major factor in giving the cooperative movement a more political emphasis. Place noted that the Cooperative Trading Society, which comprised the two Freethinking Christians and the Unitarian Universalists Watson and Lovett, sought to redress Owen's antipathy to radical reform. (19) In May 1829 they formed the National Association dedicated to cooperation and radical reform. This was merged in 1831 with the National Union of the Working Classes, in which Hetherington and Warden were especially active, addressing working men on extremes of wealth, ill-paid industry, and over-paid idleness. They were soon joined by James Savage, who drafted the BPU petition warning that taxes would be withheld pending full parliamentary reform. (20) William Ashurst was one of the first to carry the new slogan of no taxes without reform on the walls of his house. (21)

Savage and Warden used cooperative meetings to campaign for wider parliamentary representation and communitarian ideals. At a public meeting in the Institution of Industrious Classes in September 1832, Savage seconded Owen's motion to relieve the distress of non-productive industrious classes. He knew many shopkeepers were

insolvent, he said, spending their all on the landlord, the tax-gatherer and poor rates (cheers). (22) At a similar meeting on November 17th he identified the aim of Radical Reformers as more than mere reduction of taxation. This was just a means to deprive a corrupt government of the means of oppression, of a standing army, to reduce the host of taxgatherers, and to do away with the Established Church. To great applause he went on to include all tithes, all stamp trammels on a free Press, in a word, 'to prevent the governing few from trampling on the governed many'. (23)

Warden championed the independence, dignity and intelligence of the working man. In June 1833, now Secretary of the Institution, he denounced the Mechanics Institutes as a device to make better servants. 'Working men must inquire how the produce of their labour was so cunningly and avariciously abstracted from them, and thence go on in the attainment of truth, in order to obtain happiness and community'. He ridiculed the so-called 'march of intellect' with the higher classes; they spent the week 'racing, betting, fighting, drinking, swearing, praying, lying and preaching'. (24) Warden assimilated cooperative ideals to the moral perspective of rational religion. In August 1833 he sent out a circular urging moral men into a Social Community or Friends of the Rational System of Society to develop moral qualities, intellectual faculties and physical powers. (25)

The Freethinking Christians played a significant role both in popularising Owenite cooperation, and in moulding and directing it.

Their economic and social ideals were, like Carlile's, essentially those of the discontented artisan. Theirs were the traditional radical remedies: the eradication of 'unnatural' inequalities, and the establishment of a code of social justice with a premium on individual advancement; 'property holding tempered by the elective principle'. (26) Carlile had criticised Spence and Owen for their communism, and proclaimed the virtues of economic individualism and rewards for industry. Freethinking Christians had always held these virtues compatible with human brotherhood and equality. For Hetherington, Owen presented an economic structure in which the individual might achieve self-realisation through economic independence. Owen's system 'makes man the proprietor of his own labour and of the elements of production - it places him in a condition to enjoy the entire fruits of his labour, and surrounds him with circumstances that will make him intelligent and happy. (27)

Cooperation, then, became for some Freethinking Christians the practical means to a just and rational society, the 'true road to human emancipation'. (28) But for them, the millennium involved the transformation of political as well as economic structures. Church members continued to involve themselves in local politics throughout the 1820s, especially when political activity began to revive in 1825. Even Samuel Thompson seems to have renewed his links with Faringdon Without in 1830, because Carlile mentioned 'this fastidious old gentleman' denouncing Rotunda meetings at the Wardmote. (29) Thompson's attendance at Rotunda meetings excited the attention of Shegog in September and November 1830, when he recorded him debating

with Gast, Medler (of the Rellyan church), Saul and Baume, at the Optimist Chapel. (30) And of course the Universalists Hetherington, Lovett and Watson were prominent in the weekly Rotunda debates of the National Union of the Working Classes after 1831.

The first democratic victory of the Reform agitation, the Select Vestries Act of October 1831, was the achievement of the Marylebone Freethinking Christians, John and James Savage, Benjamin Warden, and Thomas Potter, tallow chandler. It was they who led the popular agitation which transformed the moderate efforts of some wealthy and influential parishioners in 1828 to assert some control over the self-elected, irresponsible Select Vestry, into a demand for accountability to every rate payer. The committee appointed by the public meeting in June favoured the elective principle, but demanded a £40 qualification for voters, £60-70 for vestrymen. Skilful application of public pressure produced Hobhouse's Bill of 1831 which gave a vote to all ratepayers, by secret ballot, and insisted on independent auditors. The wealthy complained that they had been replaced by 'small tradesmen, chandlers, shopkeepers and mechanics' and were no longer represented by their own class. (31)

John Savage was by now well known as a 'positive Christian' and Republican, lecturing on Sundays at his pub at which O'Connor established the Democratic Association. Potter was reputedly less violent, but Brooke considered that his liberalism masked his ambition, and certainly he had already done three months in Cold Bath Fields under the Six Acts. (32) All three Freethinking Christians

were noted public orators in the cause of reform, and Savage's speech at the meeting of April 29th, 1831, was both Republican and revolutionary.

It is true that representation is gaining ground, and the reasons are that the monarchy is becoming a dead letter, and we are not governed by a free king, but by an oligarchy and a faction. The eyes of the people are now opened, and in case of the boroughmongers succeed by intrigue in thwarting the present Bill of Reform, the people will not be content to remain in the state in which they are now. Though I am peaceable, yet on such an event taking place, I would not scruple to risk my life to overthrow the corruptionists. (33)

With their very practical approach to the millennium, their belief that it was to be achieved by human agency, and that they were the divinely appointed instruments of God's purpose, the Freethinking Christians exploited the political excitement of 1830-2. On December 11th 1830, John Savage was chairing a Radical Reform meeting when he announced scruples against signing a petition to a body of legislators whom he considered illegally embodied. (34) This assumption of illegality could be used to justify physical force. After the rejection of the Reform Bill in 1831, Savage and Warden invited the parishioners of Marylebone to shut up their shops, suspend all business, and assemble at the Horse Bazaar to 'address the King, support his ministers, and consult on this present state of affairs'. Thirty thousand assembled and adjourned to Hyde Park, where they were told they would be illegal if out of parish. So, swelled by



now to fifty thousand, they returned in 'good humour' to Regents Park, where Savage advised the use of constitutional means before resorting to physical force to obtain their rights (cheers). (35)

Savage and Warden figured prominently in Francis Place's catalogue of radicals who urged working people to violent action. It was they who asserted that the rejection of the Bill was sure evidence that the unproductive class resolved to continue the oppression and robbing of the working class. (36) Place named Savage amongst the Rotunda group that met at the Crown and Anchor to discuss the 'absurd notions' that everything produced belonged to the producers and should be shared, that no one should accumulate capital to become masters to make slaves of workmen, to take from them the produce of their labour, and be maintained in idleness and luxury while their slaves were ground down and starved. It was Savage who announced that the time was ripe for a general insurrection, and proposed a general strike for one month. He would probably have been amongst those 'most unprincipled' who adjourned to Benbows Coffee Shop near Temple Bar, and planned a public meeting for November 7th at which all should come armed, and staves were recommended. (37)

Savage continued to make incendiary speeches at radical meetings. At a Radical Association meeting at the Mechanics Institute in Marylebone in December 1835, gathered to demand the repatriation of the Dorchester labourers, Savage is reported as having 'torn the Whigs and Whiglings to pieces. He said that the Whigs bowed to idiots, but if they did not bow to the people their stiff necks would

be bowed for them'. (38) He moved the second resolution at a 'meeting of the people, the representatives of the working mass' at White Conduit Fields in May, 1836, to consider the wisest means of resisting restrictions on the freedom of the press. He had just made a visit to Leicester to 'spread radicalism'. (39)

Spencean and ultra radical for some thirty years, John Savage was perhaps unique amongst Freethinking Christians in carrying Universalist ideals to their logical conclusion of violent revolution. He alone advocated community of goods and a non-competitive society. For the others, practical Christianity was always essentially constitutional. Henry Fearon's political activity in 1836 took the shape of sending Place a sovereign for 'organic reform'. (40) With other respectable tradesmen like W.H. Ashurst and William Coates, he served on the committee of the Metropolitan Parliamentary Reform Association and the Metropolitan Anti-Corn Law Association. (41)

By the 1830s many of these radicals had left the Jewin Street society. Hetherington, Warden, the Savage brothers were expelled with the haberdasher Charles Barker and Robert Guthrie, Bloomsbury tailor, in 1828. They had rebelled against Thompson's authoritarian rule and denial of freedom of speech. Hetherington alleged that the Freethinking Christians had substituted brothercraft for priestcraft, a system far more odious and oppressive. He claimed that Thompson denied the equality of members, seeking to hand on the sect as patrimony to his children, restricting the office of Elder to his sons in law, with John Dillon, Cripplegate haberdasher, and Ashurst,

attorney of Basinghall Street. (42) Thompson himself retired from office in the Church in 1832 after an illness, but in 1834, prompted presumably by evidence of further liberalism and rapprochement to other sects, he published his most extreme statement of exclusivity and consecration to God's purpose. Originally a speech to the Church in St John's Square, it was published in the *Christian Reformer or Unitarian Magazine*. It split the Church in half.

'The Unity and Exclusiveness of the Church of God' used the Calvinist principle of election to justify its sense of divine mission. Thompson accepted that objections had been made of his being partial, exclusive, bigoted, tyrannical, but argued that God had the inalienable right to do what he willed with his own, and that he had chosen a few to act as tools of the Deity for the benefit of all mankind. Abraham, Isaac and Joseph were chosen not at the expense of others; God simply chose the best and wisest to be his instruments. Revelation showed that not all men were intended to be religious in this present state of existence; a select few were prepared as purified channels to cooperate with Jesus at his second coming in spreading the streams of universal beneficence through a future constitution of human society.

The divine principles of the Church were too pure for general acceptance, even in the present enlightened days, so tended naturally to separation and exclusion. All who had not the spirit of adoption were utterly incapable of appreciating the 'majestic dignity, the celestial grandeur, the paramount importance' of those principles.

Some commentators on the Prophecies had computed that the Church of God would come out of the wilderness around 1789-1800 - and their laws had been published in 1800. 'I believe that we are the light of the world at this present period'. (43)

The principle of election had never been incompatible with Universalist theology, and indeed had formed one of its founding doctrines. But its elitism was profoundly out of sympathy with rational liberalism of the 1830s. W H Ashurst acted as spokesman for the liberal majority, and in a pamphlet addressed to the Church, denied its privileged position, and argued that all sects were part of the true Church of God. Thompson's demand for him to be disciplined was rejected by a large majority under the Elder, Henry Fearon. There followed a struggle for power between exclusive and liberal parties in the Church, in which ironically it was Thompson who complained of false accusations and suppression of the truth. In December 1834 Thompson withdrew with his sons in law Coates and Dobell and their families, the Fordhams, and a few old Parliament Court members like Freeman, Teulon, and John Stevens - about thirty in all. They set up the Church of God in Tooley Street, and a week later in Cateaton Street once more. (44)

The opposing parties each published their version of the quarrel in 1835. *The Declaration of Certain Members of the Church of God to the Church meeting at St John's Square London and to Churches of God meeting at Battle, Sussex and Dewsbury Yorks* put Thompson's case; and *Reports and other Documents relative to the proceedings of the Church*

of God called Freethinking Christians meeting at St John's Square Clerkenwell that of the Ashurst and Fearon party. This explained the rebellion against Thompson's dogma in terms of his explicit injunction not to engage in political activity. It quoted from p 291 of his *Christian Reformer* article.

With the meretricious system of the world we hold no communion. As members of the Church of God, be the worldly usurpation modified as it may, we can neither partake of its honours, nor hold office under it, nor interfere in its concerns nor under any circumstances combine with its partisans, either to reform its institutions and practices. or to uphold them, or even to destroy them. The Virgin bride betrothed to Jesus, though she should not be too repulsive, can hardly be too retiring.

The *Report* pointed to the 'gross inconsistency of all this with Mr Thompson's own course of conduct for a long series of years, he more than any other in the Church 'interfered' in political concerns, and taught and incited others to do so'. It expressed amazement that other Declarationists could support him when they too had sought to reform social institutions, even to the extent of entering the House of Commons.

May, even since the signing of the Declaration, the newspapers have reported some of the names of those who signed it as 'interfering' in worldly concerns, taking part in public meetings, and 'seeking to reform' certain institutions. (45)

There had always been a tension in Freethinking Christian principle between their vision of a just society, with themselves as divinely appointed instruments of God's purpose, and their concern to keep themselves pure and unsullied by worldly power and pleasure. Their primary purpose had always been religious, to inculcate true Christianity and prepare for the second coming. Moral and spiritual regeneration had to precede political liberty and social justice. But the central dynamic of their conviction of the imminence of the millennium necessarily led them to interpret political events in this context. By 1834 most Freethinking Christians were so much involved in the movement for radical reform that separation from the world had become unthinkable. (46)

The provincial branches of the Church supported the majority who remained at St John's Square. The Dewsbury society wrote that it regretted that Thompson, who had spent his life forming the Church 'upon the Scripture model of freedom and equality' should at last become ambitious for power. The Church of God meeting at Battle declared that Thompson's conduct tended to 'destroy the equality, independence and union of the Church of God'. (47) These branches remained in correspondence with St John's Square until at least 1851. After Thompson's death in 1837, the breakaway group seems to have rejoined the Church, because Seymour Teulon was Elder in 1843. He reported to the country branches a membership of only sixty to seventy, with an expensive meeting-house for so small a body. Of this remnant there is not much evidence of vitality, political or religious. Teulon considered that they had made 'such rapid strides

as regards Scientific Truth, Political Truth and Religious Truth..that the bulk of the enquiring portion of the meeting have nearly come to our opinions, and we have no new excitement to offer'.

(48)

Church discipline, and Thompson's authoritarian style of government, had effectively alienated the more independent of spirit amongst the Freethinking Christians. Cut off from a spiritual community, their rational religion inevitably tended towards secularism. Benjamin Warden explained in a letter to *The Poor Man's Guardian* of January 21st 1832 that over the last three years he had been compelled to renounce all religion, although his radical principles remained intact; that 'the poor can become well fed, clothed, housed and educated by their own efforts, not by the aid of the rich'. No longer a member of the Universalist Church, he clearly still saw his social and political ideals as stemming from radical Christianity.

Henry Hetherington left the Jewin Street society in 1828, but his subsequent campaign for the Unstamped was inspired by the Universalist philosophy of the paramount necessity of free enquiry. It was his unrespectable, illegal *Poor Man's Guardian* which above all educated working class opinion. Place sought to coopt it into the service of the middle class radicals, and the continuous pressure of Fox's Universalists and others served to create a more sympathetic and tolerant climate towards the Unstamped street sellers and proprietors. But ultimately it was the enormous circulation of Hetherington's and Carpenter's unstamped broadsheets that led to the

reduction in stamp duty in 1836. Hetherington's imprisonment only boosted that circulation, the *Guardian* and *Destructive* reaching 50,000. (49)

Hetherington retained his Spencean ideals throughout this period, arguing in a NUWC debate on Church property that the 'land was the people's farm, and that he was demanding restitution from both temporal and spiritual lords'. (50) His campaign for the Unstamped used the four old sources of social criticism, Old Corruption, Land Theft, Competition and Exploitation. But Hetherington, O'Brien and Carpenter brought to it a new analysis based on the labour theory of value. The notion of a just wage became a basic Universalist tenet. (51)

In his Last Will and Testament, Hetherington denied the existence of a God who brought so much cruelty and injustice to the poor and destitute. Priestcraft and superstition must be destroyed to establish Truth, Justice and Liberty. (52) But only six years before his death, he published an account of his religious principles, *Cheap Salvation or An Antidote to Priestcraft* (1843), which suggests that an Universalist theology of brotherhood and community still inspired all his political activity. It was the 'essential, saving religion, or true Christianity' which 'WHOLLY consists of doing good to each other', inculcating 'a love of truth, justice, liberty and equality'.

*Cheap Salvation* integrated Universalism with Hetherington's eclectic version of Owen's socialism. The religion of Jesus was essentially



'practical and moral', based on the Owenite principle 'that the labourer must first be partaker of the fruits. It would overthrow the injustice and tyranny exercised towards the people by 'inculcating the just principle of action, and teaching them to think and judge for themselves'; 'by the gentle but powerful constraints of reason and truth, to cement mankind in amity and brotherhood'. (53)

*Cheap Salvation* embodied the Freethinking Christian principles of rationality, simplicity, belief in the inevitability of human progress, positive action, and the millennial hope. 'All it requires is that mankind should respect and love one another, and seek to promote the happiness of all according to their several abilities'. Mutual instruction - a Church principle - would promote mutual toleration and good will, and put an end to grasping landowners with their Corn Laws, hard-hearted and rapacious manufacturers who worked children fourteen or fifteen hours a day, and the refined cruelties of the Poor Law. Knowledge of plain and simple religion, and of universal salvation, would turn hypocrisy and coercion to sincerity, truth, freedom and fraternal affection. 'They will have seen their present, and will be secure of their future and eternal salvation'. (54)

For Hetherington, as for his fellow Freethinking Christians, universality of salvation was central to the struggle against an unjust society. It led to an existential, historical and concrete view of man in communion with God, and with his fellows. Through this universalist idea the eschatological promise of the prophecies became

the story of the political liberation and self-creation of man. 'To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save'. Christ offered both spiritual and temporal redemption, 'radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation'. (55)

Inspired by a conviction that they were the divinely appointed instruments of God's purpose, the Freethinking Christians devoted their lives to transforming their world into a perfect society. They saw no inconsistency in joining forces with secular millennial movements like the Spencean and Owenite, because they sought the same temporal objectives. Even when tensions within the Church had driven out several leading radicals, these still preached a political gospel which had at its heart spiritual regeneration, brotherly love, and universal happiness.

## REFERENCES

1. I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in early 19th century London* (1979), pp 142-6.
2. Church Book of Battle Freethinking Christians, March 1819.
3. *Hansard*. For Henry Fearon's protest on his marriage to Thompson's daughter, see *Medusa*, April 17, 1819, p66.
4. S. Thompson, *Reply to Mr Wright's Thoughts on Social Prayer* (1819), p 45. J. Nightingale, *Religions and Religious Ceremonies of all Nations* (1821), pp 229-263, remarked that most elders and members were men of considerable talents and respectability, 'but their unconquerable spirit for Reform both in Church and State render them objects of no small suspicion to their adversaries'. He commented on their share of persecution, and the powerful efforts made to suppress their meetings.
5. 'E.J.' *Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell*, (1878), pp 67, 15.
6. p 4.
7. p 19.

8. PRO HO 42/195 f 25.

9. *Antidote* pp 111, 1v, 15.

10. p 26.

11. 11, pp 76-93.

12. 1, pp 78-93.

13. Shegog, HO 42/195 f 25, claims that Thompson and Coates were 'chief authors of the new publication called the Radical Reformers Register'. This has not survived, but *The Radical Magazine* bears many of the characteristics of Thompson's style and content.

14. In 1828 the Church presented a solemn petition to Parliament signed by Fearon, Dillon, Ashurst, Guthrie senior, Hamilton, Thompson and Coates, setting out the separation of the Church from all other bodies, its peculiar privileges, and title of the One Church of God, its oneness and indivisibility. *Declaration of Certain Members of the Church of God to the Church meeting at St John's Square London, and to the Churches of God meeting at Battle Sussex and Dewsbury Yorks* (1835) pp 6-36.

15. J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in America* (1967), pp 107-8.

16. R.G. Garnett, 'Robert Owen and Community Experiments' in S. Pollard and J. Salt, ed. *Robert Owen, Prophet of the Poor* (1971), pp 9-10. G.D.H. Cole, *Life of Robert Owen*, (1965 ed.) pp 20, 25.

17. G. Holyoake, *History of Cooperation* (1906 ed.) i, p 40.

18. T. Kelly, *George Birkbeck* (1957), pp 121-2. Freethinking Christian meetings alternated with Hetherington's BAPCK.

19. Add. mss. 27,822 f 17.

20. *ibid* f 68.

21. J. Baylen, Gossman ed. *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Radicals* (1979) ii, pp 124-9.

22. *Crisis* 29 Sept. 1832, f 17.

23. *ibid* Nov. 19 p 146.

24. *ibid* June 1 p 129.

25. *ibid* Aug. 3. See too Holyoake, *op.cit.* p 119 on Warden's enthusiasm. E. Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture', Pollard and Salt *op.cit.*, p 96, argues that Owenism was a religion of brotherliness and joy, designed to inculcate communal feeling, group solidarity and harmony, but points out, p 106, that this was the

result of local initiatives, not Owen's. Prothero, *op.cit.*, p 254, emphasises that the Owenites rejected Owen's indifference to politics, and notes that Warden particularly contrasted the cooperative societies with their equality of rights between members, and election of officers by universal suffrage and secret ballot, with Owen's despotic rule at the Institution.

26. J. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in 19th Century Britain. Life of Richard Carlile*. (1983) p 104.

27. G. Holyoake, *Life and Character of Henry Hetherington* (1849), p 9.

28. *ibid* p 10.

29. *Prompter* Nov.13 1830 No 1. Carlile was bitterly dismissive of Thompson and the Freethinking Christians at this time, the 'highest degree of corruption that has sprung up on the Christian Church', *Lion* 17 April, 1829, p 491.

30. HO 64/11 and HO 40/25/1. It has been pointed out that London radicalism in the 1830s co-existed with sectarian religion in overlapping circles: John 'Zion' Ward, the Rotunda, Robert Owen, James 'Shepherd' Smith, and Edward Irving. E. Royle, J. Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (1982) p 127. The Freethinking Christians moved within those circles while maintaining their distinctive theological position.

31. J. Williamson Brooke, *The Democrats of Marylebone* (1839) p 17. Select Committee on Laws and Usages..Select..Vestries, *Parliamentary Papers* (1830), iv. *Carpenter's Monthly Political Letters* Oct. 1831 notes that Savage and Potter had their goods seized for non-payment of rates until the promised reform, but returned through the determined effort of parishioners.

32. Brooke *op.cit.* pp 31, 42; *Carpenter's, op.cit.*; Place, Add.mss 27,790 f 14, found Potter steadier and better informed than Savage. The original Cato Street warrant included Potter, and 'I.S.' called him the 'sage of the disaffected', HO 44/5, Mar.20, 1, 1820. See however E P Thompson's warning on the distorted evidence of spies, *Making Penguin* ed. pp 529-40, and Place's championship of moderates as against radical demagogues.

33. Brooke, *op.cit.* pp 30, 17.

34. *Prompter* Dec. 11, 1830.

35. Add.mss 27,790 ff 8, 12. Also Potter. Savage was 'one of the most outrageous leaders of the working class', determined on universal suffrage and the ballot, which Place considered impractical. The numbers in the account may well be exaggerated, but Savage's leadership and political principles are indisputable.

36. Add.mss 27,791 f 19.

37. *ibid* f 47.

38. Place Collection, set 51 f 151-3.

39. *ibid* set 70 f 523.

40. *ibid* f 303. The Committee for promoting the election of Hume at the Middlesex Election included Fearon.

41. Add.mss 35,147 f 87; 27,810 f 2, 192-4, 231; 27,816 f 442 (1839-41). Fearon chaired a meeting of the Livery reform committee in 1832, G. Spater, *William Cobbett The Poor Man's Friend* (1982), p 574 n 86. At the same time Fearon was active in the anti-Sabbatarian movement, publishing in 1833 his *Thoughts on Materialism and Religious Festivals*, which argued that there was no Scriptural command for the sanctification of any day, pp 207-10.

42. H. Hetherington, *Principles and Practice Contrasted* (1828) pp 29-30.

43. i pp 103-14, 203-6, 291-9.

44. *Declaration*.

45. Note appended to *Report*.



46. Prothero, *Artisans* pp 254-263, argues that the attraction of Owenism for many artisans was its moral quality, recognising that rational religion was important in radical movements. Lovett blamed Owen's religious views for the collapse of London coops. Prothero further claims that the Owenite movement was simply an umbrella movement for old artisan activities. Gast, Lovett, Styles, Warden supported it only because it would ensure a fair reward for labour, security of employment, and in old age, education for children, and respectable companionship. This does seem to apply to Freethinking Christians.

47. *Report* pp 151-2.

48. Church Book of Battle Freethinking Christians.

49. P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (1970) pp 77-123.

50. *Poor Man's Guardian* 24 Mar. 1832.

51. see Warden, *PMG* 30 Mar. 1833 arguing that the working class needed more pay in order to consume the glut of consumer goods. Warden had set up the London union of saddlers and harness-makers, Hollis *op.cit.* p 52. Also Hollis, pp 154-300, especially p 279 where she argues that Hetherington developed a new analysis of property, power and exploitation in which he saw the main cleavage in society as political and economic. Universal suffrage would bring the New Society of high wages, full employment and profit sharing. This was a

logical extension of the Universalist tradesmen's millennial vision.  
See too Edmunds in next chapter.

52. Holyoake, *Life and Character of Henry Hetherington* (1849), p 9.  
When Hetherington and Watson were in prison in 1837 an HO spy reported that they were 'both engaged in writing a New Penny Pamphlet which they mean to bring out shortly on the Obscene and Immoral parts of the Bible and on the Absurdity of all Religions' (Hollis p 185), but this is another example of distorted report. Both firmly believed in 'true Christianity'.

53. pp 1, preface, 8, 9.

54. pp 15-7.

55. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1985), pp 150-178. The theology and political commitment of the Freethinking Christians conform closely to Gutierrez' analysis of twentieth century liberation theology.

## CHAPTER NINE

### BRITISH UNIVERSALIST SOCIETIES AND CHARTISM

All Universalists looked to the accomplishment of God's plan for mankind in a just and equal society, and both Freethinking Christians and the South Place society were active in the campaign for constitutional reform. By the 1830s the more radical members were pressing for universal suffrage. When Henry Hetherington visited Leeds in 1834 after the collapse of local trade union efforts, he declared that nothing less than universal suffrage would break the workers' chains. (1) His *Poor Man's Guardian* was already advocating what came to be regarded as specifically Chartist proposals. In 1837, with Lovett and Watson of the South Place society, Hetherington held the first public meeting of the LWMA at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand, and drew up the petition which included all the Six Points of the subsequent Charter.

From the beginning, the London Working Men's Association pressed for distinctively working class action and peaceful protest. Hetherington opposed any alliance between the NUWC and the BPU in 1832 on the grounds of a conflict of interest with men of property, maintaining that there was a sufficiency of 'intelligence amongst the working classes to discuss all questions connected with their best interest, and a growing disposition to acquire further knowledge'. (2) This

belief in the essential dignity of the working man is also apparent in Lovett's condemnation of the violent language of O'Connor and Harney. The LWMA, he claimed, sought to unite working men 'upon principles of knowledge and temperance, and the management of their own affairs'. (3)

Of all the local and regional variations of Chartist activity, the most distinctively social reformist was that based in Glasgow, with a powerful Christian Chartist movement in 1840-1. (4) Here the Glasgow Universalist society played a leading part in promoting moral force in the early years. Moral force Chartism united Universalists in all parts of Britain, and from diverse theological traditions. Rellyans joined with Scots from James Purves' brand of Calvinist millennial Universalism, and preached the same message as Hetherington, Lovett and Watson. (5)

The founder of the Glasgow society was converted to the faith through contact with the Edinburgh Universalists. Neil Douglas (1750-1823) was a popular minister of the Relief Church, a liberal wing of the Church of Scotland which split in 1843 on the issue of patronage. (6) The son of an Argyle farmer, with noble connections on his mother's side, he had been apprenticed to a shoemaker and educated himself at Glasgow University. At university he met some of the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment and 'imbibed liberal political principles' in Fraser's words.

There is no evidence of political activity in his years as Relief minister, however. His *Sermons on Important Subjects* of 1789 are more concerned with Christian obedience and submission to God, than with opposition to secular authority. Reason is accorded only secondary place to revelation. Right reason is the voice of God, but 'blinded, carnal reason' is the 'proud idol' which corrupts the word. (7) Douglas attacks vain amusements, sensual gratifications, transient wealth and honours: sanctified poverty is an honourable state; 'for hereby you possess the nearest conformity to Jesus, who for our sake became poor, and by his voluntary poverty poured contempt on all human greatness'. (8) This could be straight Puritan exhortation, but what follows has a hint of the social protest and compassion for which Douglas was later renowned.

They who now reproach the poor abuse their Maker, who once was so himself. As he was, so were his prophets and apostles in the world not only destitute of rank, titles and estates, without silver and gold, but often in hunger and nakedness, having no certain dwelling place.

There is a condemnation of aristocratic mores in a footnote, several pages long, on duelling, that 'barbarous and shameful prevalent activity', 'disgraceful to humanity, pernicious to the cause of virtue, inimical to society'. (9)

The sermons suggest a pious young liberal with a social conscience who saw his function in moral and spiritual terms. The impact of the French Revolution transformed the moral reformer into a political activist. By 1792 Douglas had become a prominent member of the Dundee

Friends of the Constitution, commissioned to arrange the printing of a seditious pamphlet, and delegate to the Third Convention of the Friends of the People of 1793. (10) His writings had become overtly political in content. *Monitory Address to Great Britain* (1792) asserted the 'peculiar pleasure of every benevolent Christian' at the evidence of the divine hand in the French Revolution. 'Let every heart exult with joy to hear of welcome Liberty's triumphant day'. It claimed that many decrees of the Constituent National Assembly would do honour to a British Parliament, which should profit from the wisdom and example of its neighbours and correct its imperfections. (11)

The emphasis in *Monitory Address*, however, was on moral revolution, with political reform of venality and corruption in the state, abuses in the church. It proposed a limited programme of secular reform: abolition of the slave trade and duelling, of civil disabilities for Dissenters; the restoration of the usurped right of patronage to Christian people; the confiscation of clerical wealth. (12) The call for moral reform was directed exclusively at the rich and powerful, at the degraded manners of the great, especially on Sundays.

What does it avail that the springs of industry among the poorer sort are shut up one day in seven, while on that very day the sluices of sensual amusement, dissipation and folly, are set open among the great and affluent: the common people abridged of their favourite diversions on the Sabbath while families of first rank and distinction indulge in practices prohibited on other days and prostitute their houses into a

place of rendezvous for the votaries of pleasure, gaming and dissipation of both sexes. (13)

Douglas gave a distinctively moral tone to the radical condemnation of the aristocracy, sublimating social reform into a religious crusade.

By 1795 Douglas was considered a dangerous Jacobin. In his *Britain's Guilt, Danger and Duty* of 1795 he claimed that his pulpit words had often been grossly misrepresented, his name bandied about by the newspapers, his conduct maligned by hirelings' pens, lampooned in the streets. Although told that he had been marked out for prosecution, he remained conscious of the rectitude of his motives, the uprightness of his conduct; convinced of the necessity for Reform. (14) Reform he presented as God's purpose, affirming his right as a man, a Christian and a minister of the gospel to declare the truth to the glory of God, the best interests of society, and the honour of human nature. (15) The present evil times, scarcities, war, the West Indian slave revolt, were God's retributive justice on a corrupt government. (16)

So closely was moral improvement identified with social and political reform in Douglas' writings that it would seem more than probable that his missionary trip to the Highlands in 1797 would provide an opportunity for politicising the Gaelic speaking poor. Douglas himself denied that his intention was any but the saving of souls, although he could not resist criticising the lack of pastoral care and oppressive effect of patronage, the 'bloated blessings of that

lordly system'. (17) However, itinerant missionaries, and Douglas in particular, were alleged to have preached sedition. Douglas claimed that in one parish he was grossly misrepresented as preaching that the Duke of Argyle and all patrons and great people would be turned out of their castles and estates and sent down to hell. (18) And he quoted at some length from a Coventry minister's letter to the Scottish press, rebutting charges that the missionaries were 'artful and designing men, inspired with the spirit of vanity and ambition'; that 'some of them are notoriously disaffected to the Civil Constitution of this country; that they hold secret meetings; and that they abuse the name of Liberty, as a cover for secret Democracy and Anarchy'. (19) The popular perception of the missionaries as political activists suggests that Douglas was not alone in integrating religion and politics into a single gospel to the poor.

Shortly after his return from his Highlands mission, Douglas quarrelled with his Church over a loan withheld on his new church building, and left in 1798 to become an independent preacher in Edinburgh. (20) Here he set up as a printer and pursued an active interest in political reform, consorting with influential reformers like Skirving and Gerrald, advising them on how best to keep within the law. He published various tracts including *Strictures on the high price of provisions and the causes thereof*, and *Washington, the American President's death*. He was persecuted by the authorities, six officers being sent to seize his printing press. He lost more than £100, and it was only by appealing to his relative, Lord Melville, that his goods were restored, though mutilated. At this time he met



the Universalist typefounder Mathieson, presumably through their common political interests, and was drawn to his theology through his anxiety over the future state of his three children who had died in infancy, an anxiety which had reduced him to a state of near nervous breakdown. Once convinced of the universal restoration he became, in Fraser's words, 'enlarged, strengthened, irradiated, longing for action'; his faith now completely consistent with his radical social ideals.

In 1800 Douglas returned to Greenock, his birthplace, and founded an Universalist church of some fifty members, two hundred average attendance - a church which continued some fifty years and was dissolved only by death. A few years later, in 1804, he moved to Glasgow and took a hall at the Andersonian Institute which was regularly filled with some eight hundred, attracted by what Fraser called his 'burning oratory', his 'vocal thunder, mellow and musical, like Daniel O'Connell's' (sic). Fraser admits that his sermons were often called political in that he denounced misgovernment, tyranny and oppression, slavery black or white, and crimes pertaining to every class, kings, lords and commoners. His concern was for the welfare of his country, and for human kind all over the world. Douglas popularised Universalism in Glasgow, but it was a distinctively Calvinist Universalism that insisted upon election of grace, irrespective of creature will, the trinity, and the deity and atonement of Christ.

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One of Douglas' converts in these years was a prominent Glasgow manufacturer noted for his opposition to the slave trade and slavery, John Thom. He was a friend of Thomas Muir and a moderate democrat, attending the meetings of the Glasgow reformers, but avoiding the Edinburgh Conventions of 1793 and 1794 as too wild. Essentially a seeker after religious truth, he studied Glas and Sandeman, and was a personal friend of John Barclay, founder of the Berean sect. In 1808 John Thom read Vidler's *Universal Restoration*, and his attraction to the faith was confirmed by his association with Douglas, whom he met two years later. He became an Universalist in 1813, the year before he died. (21) His son, David Thom (1795-1862), founded in 1828 a society of Berean Universalists in Liverpool that corresponded with the Rellyans, and with American groups.

The Glasgow society meanwhile had identified itself with the movement for Parliamentary reform of the post-war years. Widespread distress in Scotland culminated in 1816-7 in economic depression, two bad harvests, and much unemployment. Large numbers of societies and committees were formed in the towns and villages for the futherance of universal suffrage, denouncing 'vile aristocrats', 'corrupt governments', 'liberty crushing French wars' and 'heavy taxes', 'iniquitous corn laws'. In 1816 a Glasgow meeting of forty thousand of the 'lower classes' demonstrated for Parliamentary reform, and elected a committee to present their grievances to the Prince Regent. (22) Douglas from the pulpit attributed the distress to misgovernment, and so great was his influence by now, the authorities put him on trial for sedition in 1817, on the charge that he had

drawn slanderous parallels between Nebuchadnezzar and George III, and Belshazzar and the Prince Regent.

The account of the trial affords some insights into the social composition of the Glasgow Universalist society. The authorities were obviously anxious to establish how many were of the lower orders, and one occasional attender, a weaver Alexander Gollan, maintained that most were, while Matthew Lowdon insisted that they were all well dressed, so that one could tell. From the occupations given they seem to have been the typical artisans of other Universalist societies. Of the defence witnesses, John Rentoul, member for 12 years, was a candlemaker; William Worrall (13 months), David Long (6 years), William Nisbet (7 years) were weavers; and Allen Campbell (18 months) a teacher. The prosecution witnesses, who included a surgeon, were clearly spies. As the advocate, Henry Cockburn, said in his manuscript note to the account of the trial: 'The Crown witnesses all gave their evidence in a way that showed they had smelt sedition, because they were sent by their superiors to find it'. (23)

The court heard evidence to the effect that Douglas had regularly introduced politics into his sermons, designating the Prince Regent as a poor infatuated devotee of Bacchus, as fit for a gibbet as for a throne. He had drawn parallels between the government and ancient Babylon, the king like Nebuchadnezzar, driven from the society of men for infidelity and corruption. The House of Commons was corrupt, its members thieves and robbers; the seats of the Houses of Parliament sold like bullocks in a market, the laws not justly administered,

subjects condemned without trial and without evidence. But there was considerable public sympathy for Douglas, and he was found not guilty of all the charges against him. Cockburn noted that the trial was so ridiculous that it was with difficulty that the people refrained from laughing at the prosecutors. He and the other great Scottish advocates, Lord Jeffrey, JA Murray, the MP JP Grant, all offered their services free to defend him. (24)

In his Address to the Judges and Jury, Douglas affirmed the right of every Christian minister to testify against 'whatever offends God, violates his law, infringes the essential rights of his subjects and is prejudicial to the best interests of mankind'. It was his duty to testify against the suspension of Habeas Corpus, that 'crowning abomination of our guilty land', and the daily invasion of God's prerogative. 'Can any man in his senses view the accumulation of taxes, debts, and mortgages without deep concern?' Here he reveals the economic preoccupations of the tradesmen who made up the main part of his congregation.

It is clear that this deep sense of social justice is rooted in Douglas' Universalist vision of men as equal in the sight of God. He referred to the frequent allegations, to his prejudice, and as a source of suspicion, that his hearers were generally of the lower orders. He was proud of it. The common people 'lately do themselves more honour than their superiors', bearing many insults and privations without rebellion. The rich were not their superiors in wisdom, good sense or moderation. 'Men are to be ruled as men, beings

endued with reason and human passions, who may be led by wisdom, but will not be driven by violence'. (25) This same belief in the dignity of working men was later to distinguish Hetherington, Lovett and Watson from middle-class Chartists.

Douglas' devotion to the common people and belief in social equality fell short of demanding any restructuring of society, however, and he was at pains to dissociate himself from revolution. Christianity, he said, was opposed to violence. The reform of which he was an advocate was not expressly universal suffrage and annual Parliaments; he left that to the wisdom of others. He was demanding a revolution in morals. (26) This somewhat relaxed attitude towards the pace of social and political change, so much at odds with the vehemence of his indictment of the government and affirmation of human rights, can probably be explained by his conviction of the imminent fulfilment of Biblical prophecies. Douglas had learned his Universalism from one of Purves' congregation, whose faith combined Calvinism with millennialism. For two years he had based his evening sermons on texts from Daniel, because, as he explained, the Old Testament prophets were dealing in religious politics. One could not watch the signs of the times, as Christ did, without comparing national occurrences with sacred predictions, and interfere in political questions and public conduct. (27)

The central role of millennial predictions in Douglas' theology is indicated by the reference in his Address to Bicheno's *Fulfilment of Prophecy*, and amongst the tracts published by his Glasgow printing

press was Elhanan Winchester's *Outcasts Comforted*, with Vidler's introduction. (28) The Parliament Court society was in regular communication with the Edinburgh Universalists, and it is likely that Douglas too would have been in contact. He would have broken off relations with Vidler's group after they became Unitarians, but in 1818 he visited the society formed by William Edmunds (1758-1829) in 1801 after his expulsion in 1799 from Parliament Court. (29) These were Trinitarian Universalists, deriving their theology from the Pietist, millennialist Universalism of Winchester, and sharing the religious and political beliefs of the Glasgow society. The two groups entered into a close association which lasted over ten years.

On Douglas' death in 1823, leadership of the Glasgow Universalists passed to the weaver, William Worrall. (30) Worrall edited the new Universalist journal, *The Gospel Communicator or Philanthropist's Journal* established in 1823. It opened with an account of the second meeting of the Universalist churches of West Scotland on July 9th of that year. Douglas had evangelised the surrounding towns and villages, and there were now societies in Musselburgh, Perth and Cupar linked to the Edinburgh church, Johnstone and Greenock, and an enthusiast in Ayr. The Glasgow society numbered 150 members, and a regular congregation of 300 who called each other 'Brother'. They had printed and circulated 2,000 copies of an Universalist catechism, and started a fund for church building. Contact had been made with American Universalists through the London brethren, and these sent Universalist works from both theological traditions, as well as American periodicals. The Glasgow Universalist Theological Library

included works by Winchester, Vidler and Scarlett, Purves and Ramsay, Rely and Murray, and a number of pacifist tracts. (31)

The Glasgow Universalists were also sending help and encouragement to a tiny group of twelve in Coleraine, who wrote in September 1823 to thank them for a parcel of books. Their church was established on the 'simple, primitive apostolic plan' by two Baptists, James Ewing and his brother James McCook, who had been expelled with their female friends for asserting the liberty of the will and the bodily indwelling of the Godhead in Christ. They were converted to Universalism by George Houston, who had left the Methodists over a controversy on the sacrament, bringing some members with him. Their conversion was based on Evans' *Sketches* and Ramsay's *Cyrus*. They met at Ewing's house, no 16 Brook Street, artisan dwellings now demolished, and suffered 'calumny and bitter reproach'. (32) Houston visited Glasgow in the winter of 1823, and Worrall preached in Coleraine in July 1827, (33)

The Glasgow society gave political as well as religious reasons for its support of the Coleraine group: 'in a country impoverished by systematic oppression and so depressed by an overbearing priesthood'. (34) Union and brotherly love were cardinal tenets of Universalist philosophy, and the London connection was evidently even more important. Both William Edmunds and his son James (1795-1861) sent addresses to the Glasgow society which were published in the *Gospel Communicator*. Worrall visited London in 1825, and preached at the Philadelphian Chapel, Windmill Street, Finsbury Square, to the



survivors of James Relly's original London congregation. (35) They had acquired the chapel in 1797, and were led for forty years by James Rait until his death in 1819, then by Speerway who died in 1825. Winchester's congregation had also styled itself Philadelphian, but Whittemore maintains that there was no fellowship between the Rellyans and Vidler because of the latter's insistence on future punishment. However, by 1825 the divide was between Trinitarians and Unitarians, rather than over the two variant interpretations of Universalism: restorationism, or the belief in limited future punishment, and 'ultra-Universalism', the belief that there will be no punishment after death. James Edmunds took over the leadership of the Rellyan society from Speerway, united in his belief in the efficacy of the atonement, and the divinity of Christ. (36)

The Rellyan Universalists were evidently in financial difficulties, for to help with the rent of their chapel they had let it for Sunday afternoons and evenings, only foregathering in the afternoon. It was probably at this time that Baume started using it as the 'Optimist Chapel' for his society for Promoting Anti-Christian and General Instruction. By 1830, the regular speakers there included the radical carpenter and Spencean, Henry Medlar, a member of the Rellyan group. (37) Worrall heard another leading member, Henry Bell, give a discourse on Brotherly Love, so the Rellyan social philosophy was obviously very similar to that of the Glasgow Universalists, as well as their political ideals.

The link between the Rellyans and the Glasgow society brought contact with Universalist groups in the West of England. Worrall spent three months in London, preaching on the latter parts of Sundays in a large room engaged by Brother Edmunds in Primrose Street, Bishopsgate. He was introduced to followers of Joanna Southcott - evidence of a wide millennial culture which extended beyond individual sects. (38) He also met Universalists from Shaftesbury, one of a few small societies in Dorset and Wiltshire originating from the preaching of William Upjohn, who had been converted by Winchester.

When James Edmunds visited these groups in 1827 he found a chapel in Shaftesbury fitted out for 300, but he preached to a 'miserable audience of 30' in Bishopstone. Upjohn at least was comfortably off, a Greek scholar who kept an 'elegant parlour', played various instruments, and painted in oils, although a 'very plain farmer like man in appearance'. However his society maintained the Universalist tradition of primitive simplicity, refusing to pay a regular preacher on the grounds of the apostolic doctrine that those that preach the gospel should live by it. And they displayed a social conscience in devoting Sunday afternoons to the education of the villagers' children. (39) The Rellyan society in Plymouth seems to have been less respectable, 'the most infamous characters' said to attend their meetings, but there is no evidence of any contact between them and London. (40)

Edmunds' visit to Dorset and Wiltshire in 1827 was part of a longer tour in which he made his long promised visit to the Glasgow society,

and preached at Johnstone Mechanics Institute and Greenock. On the way back he stopped off at Liverpool, probably to visit the Berean Universalist David Thom. Thom (1795-1862) had ministered to a Presbyterian congregation in Liverpool since 1823, but it was not long before his committee detected signs of unorthodoxy, and accused him of preaching the Berean doctrines. He was dismissed by the Glasgow Presbytery in 1825 on six counts, including that of asserting that eternal life was granted unconditionally, and that faith itself involves the certainty of eternal life. Thom replied that he rejected the authority of the Presbytery. 'I regard all believers of the Gospel as standing upon a footing of perfect equality and independency, in their character of Kings and Priests unto God'. In 1828 Thom opened an Universalist chapel in Bold Street with some seventy of his former congregation, and became English corresponding secretary to the American Trinitarian Universalists.

Despite this affiliating role, Thom's society remained independent of other British Universalist groups, and aloof from their political commitment. His own position was resolutely Calvinist, with the Berean variation that divine grace was mediated to each man personally through his union with Christ - a very similar notion to that of Relly. But unlike Relly, he held two levels of redemption, with special privileges for the elect, who never die but change into divine principles. The rest perish in the flesh, and reexist as supernatural. Eternal punishment is simply exclusion from the kingdom of Christ; it can never be reformatory, because all grace comes from God alone, and man is entirely conditioned by his environment. (41)

Thom's Calvinist Universalism lacked the humanism and millennial vision of a perfect society here on earth that inspired the other groups to political activity. Holding the Berean belief in the supremacy of revelation over reason, he attacked the 'pride of human reason', the 'spurious liberality' that fostered Unitarianism, and the 'maudlin and infidel class of philanthropists', Godwin and Rousseau. (42) He critically reviewed George Galloway's *The Millennium*, and dismissed Winchester's works as an 'absurd and too literal interpretation of Scripture'. (43) In his *The Number and Names of the Apocalyptic Beasts* (1848), he claimed to have studied many works of prophecy, but his conclusions were entirely spiritual; the two beasts were the human mind and the fleshly churches. (44)

However, Thom upheld the essential Universalist principle of free enquiry, and agreed to a public debate with Carlile and Taylor on their visit to Liverpool in 1829. Taylor found him 'gentlemanly, good-looking, sensible-looking, thin, elegant, mild, immensely voluble', with 'good taste, suggesting extensive reading and a highly cultivated talent'. He had a handsome chapel, but a thin congregation, mostly men. The three overcame the threatened opposition to hold a large meeting, including 200 of Thom's most respectable congregation, to debate the proposition that the Bible was the word of God, the law of everlasting truth. Carlile and Taylor claimed to have won the argument that there was no historical evidence for Christianity, a 'glorious triumph for infidelity', and Thom refused to meet them again. (45)

The centre of radicalism in Liverpool was more likely to have been with the Unitarians and the Owenite John Finch. Finch was visiting the Universalist church when Carlile and Taylor arrived, but Thom's antipathy towards the Unitarians would have precluded any fellowship between the two sects. Nevertheless, at least one of his congregation, Anne Bronte, declared a high degree of social concern and brotherly love as a natural outcome of her Universalist faith. Her poem in *The Universalist*, 'A Word to the Elect' seems to deny Thom's Calvinism:

Say does your heart expand to all mankind  
And would you to your neighbour do-  
The weak, the strong, the enlightened and the blind -  
As you would have your neighbour do to you.  
That as in Adam all have died  
In Christ shall all men live;  
And ever round his throne abide,  
Eternal praise to give.

The conviction that the glorious liberty of Universalist belief inflamed zeal for the family of mankind was affirmed by the Rellian minister, James Edmunds, in his second annual address to the Glasgow society of 1823. 'Herein the ways of God appear equal, and the Church of Christ views that great multitude for whom the sacrifice was made'. We are rational creatures with free will, he declared, with a duty to devote souls, affections, property, faculties and powers to God. (46) That Universalists had a divine mission to improve society was also the message of John Fraser in his sermon to the Glasgow

society on April 29th, 1827. (47) 'We are the instruments in the hand of God, depositories of his truth, and witnesses for Jesus'.

Fraser's vision went beyond social concern however to a specific programme of social and political reform, as a necessary outcome of the Universalist faith itself. 'The doctrine of peace on earth and goodwill to men contains in it elements that will yet regenerate the world...The benevolence of its principles would give the death blow to war...destroy the true power of the tyrant who governs in order to oppress; and who enslaves in order to increase his own selfish enjoyments'. Civil and religious liberty, a fairer distribution of wealth, and a reformed penal code must necessarily follow the principle of universal restoration. 'The spirit of liberty with which the gospel makes us free would dictate the necessity of giving all mankind that civil and religious liberty to which they are entitled. The absence of all monopoly on spiritual blessings would show the iniquity of monopolising the blessings of providence'. The laws of God, with their principle of remedial punishment, must inspire legislators to make just laws that would reform, not extinguish life. (48)

The links between the Rellian Universalists and the Glasgow society were consolidated in March 1828, when James Edmunds was invited to take Worrall's place on his death. He arrived in Glasgow a month later, leaving the care of the Philadelphian Church in Windmill Street to Henry Bell. Edmunds had been brought up in the Pietist tradition, his early reading consisting of Behmen, Swedenborg,

Wesley, Cennick, and Universalist writers of all descriptions. (49)

His father, William, had been converted by Winchester, and both attended the Parliament Court chapel until William's expulsion in 1799. Both worked at the Spitalfields silk trade which enjoyed a boom in the war years; by the time he was twelve, James was earning twenty shillings a week. The work gave him time and money to indulge his appetite for study, reading widely and attending lectures on electricity and galvanism at the Mathematical Society in Crispin Street, Spitalfields, and lectures at Hoxton. Inevitably he came under the influence of radical and rationalist ideas circulating in London at the time. When he was sixteen he heard Dr Collyer preach on Christianity compared with Paganism, Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Hinduism, Mohammedanism and Deism. He began to preach in the streets soon afterwards, and mixed freely with other sects, naming his companions at this time as Cottrell, Gay, a Methodist minister turned Swedenborgian, and Joanna Southcott.

Edmunds seemed to have mixed in Radical political circles, attending the trials of Hone and Carlile, and Burdett's release from the Tower. He was active in the formation of the London Mechanics' Institute at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in 1823. Disappointed by one vote in being elected to the committee, he became a founder committee member of the Spitalfields Mechanics' Institute, where he gained knowledge of Natural and Experimental Philosophy which enabled him to set up as a lecturer in the 'sublime science of astronomy'. At the time of the repeal of the Spitalfields Acts in 1824, Edmunds claimed to have been

one of those deputed by the weavers to give evidence before the House of Lords. (50)

The new leader of the Glasgow Universalists obviously shared their social ideals and artisan background. Their new church at Great Dove Hill, Gallowgate, taken on a fourteen year lease, was well appointed, and held 250. Edmunds found his new congregation a mixed bunch: 'some of them were decidedly pious, others were too much pleased with new views of scripture - a few of them were mere skeptics - a few Unitarians, and others antinomians'. His own position was liberal Calvinist: 'trinitarian, mediatorial as it respects the work and offices of our Lord Jesus Christ, future limited punishment, and finally an universal restoration of all wicked men and fallen angels to primitive holiness and felicity'. He criticised Worrall for introducing the antinomian American theology that denied election, justification, personal religion and future punishment. (51)

A weaver by trade himself, with weavers in his congregation, Edmunds would have been concerned at the widespread unemployment and distress in the Glasgow textile industry. The weavers in particular suffered from a gross oversupply of labour, the handloom industry attracting numbers of adult male immigrants, too old for factory work, and with little skills. The Handloom Weavers Commission of 1834 recorded a drop in the weekly wage from twenty shillings in 1810-16, to seven in 1826-30. (52) The Scottish weavers had made several attempts to fix a minimum wage, the last ending in a general strike call from Aberdeen to Carlisle in 1812, and the arrest and imprisonment of the Glasgow



committee in 1813. (53) When the depression of 1829 exacerbated an already desperate situation, James Edmunds took the initiative of calling for a just wage on Universalist principles. His sermon, *The Mechanic's Claim to a Sufficient Remuneration for his Labour, consistent with Scripture and Reason* was preached before 12,000 journeymen weavers on Glasgow Green on 30th March, 1829, and later published at their request.

Taking as his text Matthew 10,v 10, 'The labourer is worthy of his meat', Edmunds based the right to a living wage on the injunction to Adam to work, on the worker's essential dignity as a man.

Upon this ground you claim the sympathy: you claim the attention; you claim the protection of the judicial power; you appeal to the lovers of equity and uprightness to look into your case, and make such legal alterations as will meet your necessities, and give proper encouragement to the honest and industrious mechanic.

The appeal to Scripture and humanity was supported by the utilitarian consideration that a just remuneration was 'consistent with sound policy and the welfare of the nation at large. The political character of our country must result from internal distributive justice'.

But there is also an awareness that common humanity is deeply divided by class interests.

The greatest evil of society is caused by the division among its parts. The wealthy tradesman is often led to oppose, or at

least to disregard the complaints of the operative class, because he fears that if he attends to them, he shall be creating a power that will overwhelm him. The gentry again stand aloof from the commercial world as beneath their notice; considering a man that engages in any mercantile pursuit, in a different light from one of their own order and both these classes often neglect the Mechanics, and turn a deaf ear to their complaints.

The logical corollary of class solidarity was combination, and this Edmunds urged as token of 'the unanimity of brotherly friendship'. 'Under the present pressure of the times, allow me also to recommend union- cooperation; in a peaceful manner this must be conducted'.

*The Glasgow Courier* of March 31 reported the sermon as appearing to afford much satisfaction. It gave the assembly as about 20,000, with numerous other speeches protesting at the state of the weaving trade, high taxes and the Corn Laws. The magistrates refused to treat with the weavers in such an assembly, and offered to consider forms of temporary employment the following morning. The meeting dispersed peaceably, and next day a weavers' delegation attended the Council Chambers to ask for a general subscription to ensure immediate relief, and employment at out-door labour to as many as possible. The magistrates refused the first request, but offered out-door work to a 'considerable number' immediately. Thus 20 workmen started work on a new road at one shilling a day, and 20 more the following day. (53)

The ludicrous inadequacy of the government response did nothing to alleviate the distress of the weavers, and in 1830 their agitation received fresh impetus from the French Revolution. Universal suffrage became the popular panacea for all ills. There were demonstrations on Glasgow Green and in 1831, a meeting of 100,000 working people for parliamentary reform. In 1832, 120,000 marched in procession carrying banners with the slogans 'Liberty or Death' or 'He that hath not a sword let him sell his garment and buy one'. At Edinburgh the *Trades Examiner* was started 'for the working class against all opposing parties', and the Glasgow trades founded in 1832 *The Liberator*, run after 1836 by the Ayr 'leveller', Dr John Taylor.

(54)

Universalist leadership of this working class movement devolved increasingly upon John Fraser. Not long after his sermon on Glasgow Green, Edmunds began to entertain doubts on Universalism - for social as much as doctrinal reasons, it seems. In April 1830 he visited Aberdeen, and was much impressed with the attendance at the Presbyterian church where he preached to over a thousand. He wrote to his wife that he was beginning to think that Universalism did not bear so important a relation to the plan of redemption as he had supposed, and that the Presbyterians were more pious, 'have their tempers more restrained - their souls more engaged about the gospel'. He decided that he might increase his 'comfort and usefulness' by leaving the Universalists and joining the Scottish Independent Church. His place was taken by John Hervey. John Calder, and others, alternately, until John Mitchell was appointed minister

in 1849. (55) But it was Fraser who led the Glasgow Universalists into the forefront of Scottish Chartism.

In the early thirties Fraser was active in establishing Political Unions which sought to make parliamentary candidates accountable to the wishes of the people. In 1836 he founded the Scottish Radical Association and Teetotal Society to promote Universalist ideals of self-improvement. It had four principles: universal suffrage, annual parliaments, ballot, and a voluntary church system. Although based in Edinburgh after 1820, Fraser kept close links with Glasgow, organising in 1836 a torchlight procession for O'Connor's visit. In 1838, as political discontent found new direction and purpose in the Chartist movement, Fraser began *The Edinburgh Monthly Democrat and Total Abstinence Advocate* to advertise the progress of 'Radical democracy' throughout the Scottish villages, and to promote abstinence. After four issues it gave way to a weekly, *The True Scotsman*, which soon boasted a wider circulation than the *Whig Scotsman*. Fraser and his fellow moral-force activist, the Rev. Abraham Duncan, represented Edinburgh at the London demonstration in September. (56)

The leadership of the Scottish movement was with Fraser and Duncan in Edinburgh, but the centre of moral-force activity swung back to Glasgow in August 1839 when the 'people of Scotland held a great national delegate meeting, to devise a system of enlightened organisation, and to suggest measures to promote sound and constitutional agitation'. (57) The role of Universalists in

organising this convention is indicated by the choice of the Universalist church as meeting place for upwards of seventy delegates from the fifty most important and populous districts of Scotland.

The campaign strategy adopted also had all the hallmarks of Universalist evangelism. It was decided to employ political missionaries, 'calm, knowledgeable, rhetorical, of unblemished moral character' who would 'preach to the oppressed the doctrine of universal justice, to arouse the enslaved millions from their deadening apathy, to inspire them with a pure and exalted love of freedom, and to unite them beneath its hallowed banners'. Fraser and the Rev. Patrick Brewster had denounced the insurrectionary methods of J.R. Stephens and Feargus O'Connor at the Calton Hill meeting in Edinburgh in December 1838. (58) This Glasgow meeting formulated the constitutional alternative, to be carried out with dignity by working people in just and peaceful pursuance of their essential human rights. Their weapon was education. Tracts were to disseminate

a complete body of sound political information, embracing in its scope the cause, nature and extent of our wrongs; the rights which civilised society owes to us, and which we inherit from our Creator; as also the appalling details of legislative misrule, the enormities which a reckless aristocracy have perpetrated on those over whom they have tyrannised, and the power an organised nation would have in redressing its own grievances, so as to induce the people, by imbuing their minds with this knowledge, to concentrate their energies in the acquisition of their liberty'. (59)

organising this convention is indicated by the choice of the Universalist church as meeting place for upwards of seventy delegates from the fifty most important and populous districts of Scotland.

The campaign strategy adopted also had all the hallmarks of Universalist evangelism. It was decided to employ political missionaries, 'calm, knowledgeable, rhetorical, of unblemished moral character' who would 'preach to the oppressed the doctrine of universal justice, to arouse the enslaved millions from their deadening apathy, to inspire them with a pure and exalted love of freedom, and to unite them beneath its hallowed banners'. Fraser and the Rev. Patrick Brewster had denounced the insurrectionary methods of J.R. Stephens and Feargus O'Connor at the Calton Hill meeting in Edinburgh in December 1838. (58) This Glasgow meeting formulated the constitutional alternative, to be carried out with dignity by working people in just and peaceful pursuance of their essential human rights. Their weapon was education. Tracts were to disseminate

a complete body of sound political information, embracing in its scope the cause, nature and extent of our wrongs; the rights which civilised society owes to us, and which we inherit from our Creator; as also the appalling details of legislative misrule, the enormities which a reckless aristocracy have perpetrated on those over whom they have tyrannised, and the power an organised nation would have in redressing its own grievances, so as to induce the people, by imbuing their minds with this knowledge, to concentrate their energies in the acquisition of their liberty'. (59)

The rather breathless style here is probably that of the *Chartist Circular's* editor, William Thompson, but Fraser contributed regularly, and it is surely his Universalist ideals that fashion its political message. Universal redemption is presented as the basis of political liberty and human rights. By this the people 'know that their present condition is opposed to the attributes of a benevolent Deity, and that God never made an eternal hell for the honest poor who are compelled by 'man's inhumanity to man' to endure a hell upon earth'. This is an essentially Christian Chartism. 'Now, with the help of God, with the Bible in one hand, and the Charter in the other, with religious veneration, patriotic firmness, and political honesty, they have constitutionally resolved to work out their own salvation'. (60)

Universalism predicates natural equality and on this basis the *Circular* condemned social hierarchy and authoritarian government. The people had been taught passive obedience as a virtue of a God of vengeance. 'There is nothing in the person or character of aristocrats and clergymen more sacred than other men. The peasant is as sacred as the earl, and the mechanic is as sacred as the minister; anything taught to the contrary is political deception'. (61) Universalist equality extended to women as well as men. It was the crafty game of aristocrats and political priests to enslave women by superstition. 'I wish to see a nation of philosophical, intelligent and political mothers', members of political and philosophical institutions, seeking to have the laws repealed and amended 'to suit your social and domestic circumstances and your advancement in

knowledge'. Liberty, equality and happiness were consistent with Christianity. 'You may teach your children 'The People's Charter' while you teach them to understand Christ's Sermon on the Mount - they are in unison with one another'. (62)

The political message of Chartism as preached in the *Chartist Circular* was simply that of the Universalist faith, a faith which must inevitably procure for an educated and enlightened working class their constitutional rights.

Let the people still continue to blend science with religion - let them entirely shake off the fetters of superstition and bigotry from their enlightened minds - let them legally and constitutionally unite to obtain their rights - and the British Parliament will be compelled to legalise the Charter to our honest and intelligent population'. (63)

The practice of the Universalist religion was the means to political freedom.

Universalism was the pure religion of Jesus Christ, a practical morality summed up by the Sermon on the Mount as benevolence and honesty.

If all the people were daily to read and practise the pure precepts of Jesus Christ as they are recorded in the Gospels - if they were to meet regularly on Sabbath days, in small assemblies, and in private houses, and instruct each other by reading his life and precepts in the New Testament, and sing hymns, and pray with simplicity and piety; and if each honest



man was to perform these religious duties in his turn, this would be pure Christian worship. This is pure Christianity. It will lead you to enjoy civil and religious liberty here, and glory hereafter'. (64)

Fraser's *True Scotsman* preached the same message, with temperance added, its aim 'to do away with all that impedes the gospel in the hearts of men, especially drink, and all that inflames men against each other'. The newspaper demanded a free and equal society of independent working men, elevated in their moral and intellectual condition, and gaining a due reward for their labour. Its objects were to secure for them happiness and manly independence, to make friends of all classes of society by convincing them of the just claims of the People, and to wage ceaseless war against intoxication. And again the inspiration is universal salvation. 'Is heaven's gates banned against us? No, but to us they are widely extended'. 'Let us march to the battlefield with moral artillery to lay waste the citadel of corruption'. (65)

It was the Glasgow Chartist leaders who gave the Scottish movement its assertiveness and confidence in the early years up to 1842. Through efficient party organisation and an enthusiastic Chartist press they succeeded in developing a network of temperance associations and cooperative stores, with Chartist halls in many villages. Chartists held the most prominent position of all parties in the kingdom, claimed the *Scottish Patriot* at the end of 1840.

Universal Suffrage has now been carried from the public arena

into the domestic hearth of the working classes. It has become a part of the social character of the people. It is associated with their amusements. It has become identified with their religion. (66)

The inspiration of this Christian Chartism was a belief in universal redemption which insisted upon natural equality, human rights and social justice. The central dynamic of the Universalist faith was its double orientation to a redemptive past and a redemptive future. The one expiatory act of the atonement redeeming all mankind gave the certainty of liberty, equality and happiness. Fraser expressed this millennial hope in his sermon of 1827 as bringing 'a time when men will supremely love God and all mankind must be brought about by the renovating power of the Gospel of peace'. The means to bring this about was the Universalist faith itself, 'the wide diffusion of the science of salvation' which was 'preeminently qualified to exalt the condition of man to the highest pinnacle of moral greatness and piety'. (67)

Moral-force, Christian Chartism as preached by Fraser and the Glasgow Universalists had its exact counterpart in the Chartism of Lovett, Hetherington, and the LWMA. Lovett defined the aims of Chartism as to place our institutions on the basis of justice, to secure labour its reward and merit its fruits, and to purify the heart and rectify the conduct of all, by knowledge, morality and the love of freedom.

Those aims were firmly based on his Universalist faith as inspiration to political action.

Will those who esteem all mankind as brethren, and all the nations of the earth as one great family, whose golden rules of Christian duty are based on principles of brotherly love, equality and justice, permit those glorious principles to be outraged by men of wealth and power...Will the followers of him who ever denounced extortion and injustice and proclaimed that the poor and oppressed were the especial objects of his mission, remain silent spectators of oppression and injustice? (68)

It has been argued that Chartism involved a 'particular linguistic ordering of experience...systematic linkages supplied by assumptions of radicalism: a vision and analysis of social and political evils which predated class consciousness'. This view sees radicalism as emerging as a coherent political programme of plebeian political aspirations from the 1790s, reforging the vocabulary of the 17th century, and adapting to the challenges of political economy and Owenism in attributing economic evils to a political source. (69) The linguistic ordering of experience of the Universalist Chartists was essentially Christian and millennial, their assumptions of radicalism derived from their belief in universal redemption. Universalists strove for the realisation of God's kingdom here on earth, and exploited secular movements like Owenism to this end.

Chartism, as formulated by Lovett and Fraser, was simply the political expression of their faith, the means of salvation from oppression and injustice. For Fraser, Christ was 'a great religious, moral and political Reformer', who denounced the Pharisees, the rich, and preached a gospel to the poor. 'He taught them the doctrine of their universal redemption from ecclesiastical, political, civil and Satanic bondage, with the mild precepts of brotherly love, 'peace on earth, good will to men', political and religious liberty and social equality'.

Fraser quite explicitly identified Chartism with Christianity.

No man, we believe, can be a true Christian unless he is also a sincere Christian Chartist, for Jesus Christ is the Divine Founder of the Christian Chartist Church and the prime teacher of our political doctrines. He taught men to 'love God, to love their neighbours as themselves, and to forgive their enemies'.

We desire no other religious, political and social doctrines than these, these make for a golden age of harmony, Paradise on earth. (70)

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2. Add.mss. 27,796 f 333; *Poor Man's Guardian* 10 Nov. 1832.
3. *Life and Struggles* (1876) pp 159-62. See too his *Social and Political Morality* (1853) in which he catalogues man's duties to emphasise the acquisition of skills, and 'intellectual and moral culture', p7. This educational and rational approach was also characteristic of many provincial movements, eg Leeds, with its strong Nonconformist element, J.F.C. Harrison, Briggs *op.cit.* p 82. It was an approach spelled out by Detrosier in his *Address to Members of the New Mechanics Institute, Manchester* (1829, 1831), pp 1-17, and *Lecture on the Utility of Political Unions* (1832), pp 3-24.
4. A. Wilson, 'Chartism in Glasgow' in Briggs, *op.cit.* pp 249-87.
5. In London some of Fox's group were ultra-democrats, like W.J.Linton, *English Republic*, in which republicanism is a radical extension of Universalist ideals, an adaptation of Chartism to the new needs and conditions after 1848. See F.B. Smith, *Radical Artisan, William James Linton, 1812-97* (1973), pp 1-26.
6. T.C. Smout, *History of the Scottish People (1560-1830)* (1973) p 217.

John Fraser's biography of Douglas, *The Universalist* ii (1851) pp 347-362.

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11. pp 184-6.

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16. p 83.

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22. T. Johnston, *History of the Working Classes in Scotland* (1974) p 271; J.D. Young, *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class* (1979) pp 58-9.
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24. *Universalist* and account of trial, pp 2-23.
25. Address appended to account of trial, pp 22-6. Account of trial p 28.
26. Address p 33.
27. p 34.
28. *Universalist* p 362.
29. *Gospel Communicator* iii (1827), p 189.

30. J. Brown, *Religious Denominations in Glasgow* (1860), p 116.

31. *Gospel Communicator* i pp 2,4,5,6,8,77. The Freethinking Christian, Joseph Brayshaw, had evidently stirred up unrest on his Scottish lecture tour of 1820, but there is no evidence of any links between the two Universalist societies. See E. Royle, J. Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (1982), p 127; *Republican* 21 June 1822.

32. Site confirmed as artisan dwellings by Miss G. Kay, OU Staff Tutor, Belfast.

33. *Gospel Communicator* i, pp 79, 233; ii, p 85.

34. ii, p 18.

35. ii, p 391; T. Whittemore, *The Modern History of Universalism* (1830), p 299.

36. G. Rowell argues that Universalism from such different theologies could never be truly united. 'History of Universalist Societies in Britain 1750-1850' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* xxii no 1 (Jan. 1971), p 47.

37. I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics* (1979), p 261. Medlar is named amongst the Spenceans in several spies' reports of 1818 and 1819, eg



HO 42/177, 29 June, 1818; HO 42/189, 15 July, 1819; HO 42/190, 26 July, 1819, where he is named as being on the managing committee.

38. J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming* (1979), p 131. See too Samuel Thompson and his meeting with Brothers, above.

39. *Gospel Communicator* iii, p 348, ii p 393; *The Universalist* ii, pp 217, 266-7, 364; James Edmunds' journal.

40. Rowell, *op.cit.* p 48. *Universalist* ii p 216 alleges great progress at Plymouth, the church being built to accommodate 4-5000.

41. *Dialogues on Universal Salvation* (1838), pp 77-126. See F. Venturi, *Utopia and Reform* (1971), pp 99-114. *The Monthly Repository* enthusiastically promoted Beccaria's ideas, as of course did Bentham.

42. *The Universalist* i (1850), p 5; preface to J. White, *Restoration of all Things* (1851), p 53. There is a reference in *Universalist* i p 7 to 'circumstances of a distressing nature' which occurred in the Glasgow society after Worrall's death, 'under which the cause of Scottish Universalism is still suffering'. This sounds like a condemnation of their political activities.

43. *Universalist* i, pp 271-281.

44. pp xxi, 392.

45 *Lion* Aug. 21 1829, no 8, p 230 ff.

46. *Gospel Communicator* ii, p 274; First Address, i, pp 212-3.

47. John Fraser (1794-1879) was a Johnstone schoolmaster, and convert and close friend of Neil Douglas, sharing his political views. He was imprisoned for his part in the Radical agitation of 1820, but later exonerated. A. Wilson, *Chartist Movement in Scotland* (1970), p 26; L.C. Wright, *Scottish Chartism* (1953), p 38; P.B. Ellis and S. MacA'Ghobhain, *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820* (1969), pp 22-8, 115 ff.

48. Fraser's sermon in *Gospel Communicator* iii, pp 201-7.

49. All this paragraph from James Edmunds' journal.

50. His evidence is not included in the published minutes, in which all the witnesses are men of long standing in the trade. *Parliamentary Papers* xiii (1823).

51. Journal. One at least of the congregation must have been a freemason, as Edmunds records that he was made a Master Mason of the Grand Thistle Lodge in 1829, but found the ritual ridiculous and offensive. His journal does tend to play down his radical sympathies.

52. Johnston *op.cit.* pp 236-244; Young *op.cit.* pp 77-8.

53. *Glasgow Courier* April 2, 1829. Lovett advanced similar arguments for a just wage in *Address to the London Trades Committee* of 1838, in which he warned that without combination workers would be reduced to starving point, since employers could not resist the temptation to reduce wages to increase profits, p5.

54. Johnston, pp 244-6, Young pp 78-81, Wilson pp 26-34.

55. Brown *op.cit.* p 116.

56. Wilson pp 26-56, Johnston pp 246-8, Young pp 84-6.

57. *Chartist Circular* (1837-41) iv, for this meeting.

58. A. Wilson in Briggs *op.cit.* pp 255-6.

59. *Chartist Circular* iv.

60. p 40, November 30, 1839.

61. p 50, December 21.

62. pp 35-6, 23 November 1839.

63. p 59, January 4, 1840.

64. p 72, January 25.

65. *True Scotsman* Feb. 16 1839, Mar. 16.
66. quoted in Wilson, Briggs *op.cit.* p 260.
67. *Gospel Communicator* iii, p 208, July 2 1827.
68. William Lovett and John Collins, *Chartism* (1840), pp 1-2.
69. G. Stedman Jones in 'The Language of Chartism', *The Chartist Experience* (1982), pp 10-2; also *Languages of Class* (1983), pp 93-178. See too E. Royle, *Chartism* (1980), pp 7-19, 86, and A. Briggs, 'The Language of Class in Early 19th Century England', in M.W. Flinn, ed., *Essays in Social History* (1974), pp 157-170.
70. *Chartist Circular* Aug. 29 1840, p 197.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CONCLUSION: A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Salvation, the central theme of the Christian faith, was obviously basic to the radical politics of Universalist Chartists. Their experience and the structure of their thought was ordered by their distinctive belief in universal redemption, their actions inspired by a vision of a just and equal society in which God's purpose was fulfilled. For them, the certainty of salvation embraced all human reality and transformed it. (1) It alone provided the spur to social action.

Universalism in Britain was essentially a phenomenon of the 18th century, an interpretation of Scripture in line with secular Enlightenment ideals of rationality and natural justice. (2) One branch developed out of antinomian Calvinism and the Methodist revival; the other from an intellectual mystical tradition with its roots in the Renaissance. Both shared a passionate belief in the literal fulfilment of prophecy and a mystical humanism that set man at the centre of creation. From this perspective, temporal and spiritual redemption were one, and temporal, earthly, historical events stages in human liberation. Man fulfilled himself, assumed his

destiny in history, by transforming the world and building a just society.

The first Universalist societies met together in the City of London and Edinburgh New Town. It was a creed that appealed to artisan and lower middle class seekers after a personal religion that was at once ethical, rational, and emotionally satisfying. James Edmunds' early instruction in Pietist works confirms the view that these were the men most likely to be attracted to mystical religion. (3)

There is no reason to suppose, however, that their criticism of society was a result of social deprivation. (4) Most Universalists were independent tradesmen, some quite wealthy. Most had probably moved to the city relatively recently, and were not qualified to vote. (5) Their sense of deprivation was essentially political; their economic interests demanded representation, regulation of credit, control of corruption. Universalist theology, with its merging of spiritual and temporal aspirations, met the needs of that social group, at that time and place.

Born of an interaction of secular and religious ideas, British universalism continued a dynamic relationship with secular creeds of reform and revolution. Universalists shared the popular conviction that the American and French Revolutions confirmed the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy and the imminence of the millennium. But as millenarian enthusiasm waned towards the end of the 1790s, the Parliament Court Church, and afterwards the group at Jewin Street,

accommodated the authentic millennarian tradition to Spencean ideas and Owenism. (6) The society at South Place, on the other hand, absorbed Benthamite Utilitarianism, and informed it with a new emotional power and vitality.

From the 1780s onwards, British Universalist societies provided a focus and forum for advanced social and political thought. In Edinburgh and Glasgow they attacked King and government, and championed civil rights. In London they published political commentary when Jacobin newspapers were silenced by the threat of persecution. Several members were involved in publishing radical tracts and works of freethought.

Universalist publications promoted political reform through the monthly commentary in the *Miscellany*, *Monthly Repository*, and *Freethinking Christian Magazine*, *Quarterly Register*. Each campaigned for civil rights and liberties, free enquiry, popular education, and a more rational and egalitarian approach to women. Each responded to radical fashions in education and penal reform, but essentially their ideals were inherent in their liberal theology. Universalist ideals helped to form the currents of opinion that created the priorities of early Victorian Britain, and formed the basis of moral-force Chartism.

Always a very tiny sect, the Universalists had a political influence out of all proportion to their numbers; their success indeed largely attributable to their closely knit, coherent organisation. The

Parliament Court Church played a significant part in Westminster elections and the campaign for parliamentary reform. The South Place society had an active role in the constitutional revolution of 1828-32, and the Reform Bill agitation. Its members led the ensuing demand for action on social problems and constitutional reform. Freethinking Christians were notable in City politics, in the Reform Bill agitation, and the reform of Select Vestries. They dominated subterranean political clubs like the LWMA, spearheaded the struggle for a free press, and formulated Chartism.

It was the achievement of Universalists like Hetherington, Lovett and Fox to integrate socialist and cooperative theory to the traditional political radicalism of Paine, Cobbett and Hunt on the basis of their vision of pure Christianity. Owen's plan was found to be 'exactly consistent with the spirit and benevolent injunctions of Christianity' and Christ identified with the sufferings of the poor, expiating his 'sedition' on the cross. (7) Fox based the labour theory of value on St Paul's injunction to the Thessalonians to work: 'the laws of revelation are the laws of nature, and the precepts of Christianity are expositions of the dealings of Providence'. (8) Hetherington supported his identification of the aristocracy as the enemy of the poor with the gospel parable of the rich man and the eye of the needle. 'Christ laboured from the age of twelve to thirty-three to destroy the cannibal system which immolates the many to the murderous avarice and ambition of the few'. He died in his 'attempt to destroy the inhumanity of riches'. (9) Lovett defined Chartism as a movement of moral regeneration, its objects



to place our institutions on the basis of justice, to secure labour its reward and merit its fruits, and to purify the heart and rectify the conduct of all, by knowledge, morality, and the love of freedom. (10)

The pure gospel Christianity which underlay the Chartist political programme was above all a gospel of universal salvation. From this derived the principles of morality, justice, and natural equality, human potential and 'idealised and personified perfection and progress'. (11) Lovett believed that these principles of morality were 'general and universal, embracing the well-being of the great brotherhood of man'. (12) They comprised Fox's 'religion of humanity', the 'soul of all peculiar systems of religion', universal to all though expressed in Scripture. This 'religion of Nature' he summed up as 'the perfection of Divinity - the immortality of humanity'. (13)

Universalism had always incorporated a significant humanist element, and as the century progressed this took priority over the search for religious truth. By 1840, most of the radical Universalists had left their societies, resentful of the discipline imposed by elders. Rational Christianity, infidelity, tended to shade into atheism, and Secularism replaced Owenite Socialism. (14) The South Place society underwent a steady process of secularisation, its more upper-class members especially susceptible to religious doubt.

But a South London Universalist Church was still meeting in 1968. It claimed direct descent from the Parliament Court society. (15) Bombed

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out in the war from its church on Clapham Common which had apparently been continuously Universalist since 1643, it moved to a room near Hyde Park Corner. Its minister was William Arthur Peacock (1905-68), a journalist who was prominent in the Labour movement 1925-45. A friend of Ben Tillett and Tom Mann, acquainted with Citrine, Bevin, Hicks and Swales, he edited the *Clarion* and was chief spokesman at Labour Party Sunday meetings.

Peacock had been converted to universalism by the previous minister, Dr Macgregor-Reid, who like him was fascinated with Eastern religions, and radical politics. Reid had lived in a Buddhist monastery and translated Oriental scripture. He had written a commentary of the Book of Revelation, so was interested in millennialism, and had a knowledge of the Jewish Cabbala and Jewish mysticism. He had known Rossetti, William Morris, Herbert Spencer and George Jacob Holyoake.

Macgregor-Reid's statement of belief for the church shows that the Universalists' radical theology of liberation remained essentially unchanged despite being filtered through Secularism, Socialism, Theosophy and Eastern religion. Their commitment to social action to build a just and equal society remained as strong as ever. (16)

Universalists affirm belief in the sacredness of human personality, the more abundant life, the consecration of the individual to the common good, the bearing of one another's burdens, the necessity of justice in economic relationships, the love of mankind in all relationships and the Kingdom of God

on earth. (17)

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3. J.F.C. Harrison, *Second Coming* (1979), p 19. P. Lineham, 'The English Swedenburgians 1770-1840', unpub. D.Phil. thesis, Sussex, 1978, p 67, finds that the climate after 1780 was conducive to mystical religion.
4. Harrison, *op.cit.* p 222.
5. The two surviving Poll Books for 1802 and 1818 have only a few names that can be linked to Universalist members, but the identification is purely speculative.
6. *Making* p 420 claims that the authentic millenarian tradition died out in the late 1790s.
7. P. Hollis (ed.) *Poor Man's Guardian* (1969), Introduction p xxix. *Economist* i No 17 (1821) p 263. *Poor Man's Guardian* 1 (July 9, 1831).

Hetherington declared himself a Christian, *PMG* 96 (6 April, 1833), but designated priests 'accomplices of despotism and superstition', endeavouring 'to reconcile the poor to the enormities of the rich by inculcating the belief that all our evils are but so many dispensations of God's providence, or else the necessary results of our own corruption', original sin. *PMG* 117 (31 August, 1833). See too *PMG* 118 (7 Sept. 1833), and 203 (25 April 1835) on the Wesleyans as a dead weight on political movements of the people.

8. W.J. Fox, *Lectures on Christian Morality* (1833), 'The Law of Labour', *Memorial Edition of Collected Works* (1864-8) p 221.

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10. *Chartism* (1840) p 1.

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12. *Social and Political Morality* (1853) p 195.

13. *Works* pp 264, 281-2.

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15. W.A. Peacock, *Yours Fraternally* (1945), and his obituary in *General Assembly Directory* (1969-70). Peacock based his claim on the 17th century universalism of the church on an altar inscribed with that date.

16. Royle, *op.cit.* discusses other Socialists with Christian sympathies, pp 81-4.

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*Crisis* (1832-4)

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